

Economic Inequality *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*
by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Bloomsbury Press, 2009

Remarks prepared by John Peale January 12, 2016

A paradox: at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume with little or no community life, not to mention an increasing of mass shootings - all this despite levels of wealth and comfort unprecedented in human history? This is the topic Wilkinson and Pickett look to investigate in *The Spirit Level*.

We are deeply ambivalent about wealth and material gain. Mainstream politics does not tap into these issues. We have lost sight of any collective belief that society could be different. Instead of a better society, the only thing almost everyone strives for is to better their own position – as individuals – within the existing society. In this book the authors show that the quality of social relations in a society is built on material foundations. The truth is that both the broken society and the broken economy resulted from the growth of economic inequality.

They say that they will start by outlining the evidence which shows that we have got close to the end of what economic growth can do for us. Not only have measures of wellbeing and happiness ceased to rise with economic growth but, as affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous social problems.

The evidence shows that happiness has not increased even over periods long enough for real incomes to have doubled. But as nations join the ranks of the affluent developed countries, further rises in income count for less and less wellbeing.

We have also have to recognize that in the problems of global warming and the environmental limits to growth present levels of consumption are unsustainable.

In the course of our research we became aware that almost all problems which are more common at the bottom of the social ladder are more common in more unequal societies. We have combined all the health and social problem data for each country and separately for each US state.

The problems in rich countries, are not caused by the society not being rich enough, but by the scale of material differences between people within each society being too wide.

The evidence shows that reducing inequality is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life, for all of us. The best way of responding to the harm done by high levels of inequality would be to reduce inequality itself. Far from being inevitable and unstoppable, the sense of deterioration in social well-being of social relations is reversible.

Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, has put together impressive evidence that we really are much more anxious and depressed than we use to be. This

evidence comes from the administration of standardized anxiety measures to samples of the population.

So what's going on? The answer turns out to be a picture of increasing anxieties about how we are seen and what others think of us which has, in turn, produced a kind of defensive attempt to shore up our confidence in the face of these insecurities. The defense involves a kind of self-promoting, insecure egotism which is easily mistaken for high self-esteem.

The task was then to develop psychological tests which could distinguish between people with a healthy and those with an unhealthy kind of self-esteem. This unhealthy high self-esteem is often called 'threatened egotism,' insecure high 'self-esteem,' or insecure 'narcissism.'

It's hard to disregard social status because it comes so close to defining our worth and how much we are valued. To do well for yourself or to be successful is almost synonymous with moving up the social economic ladder.

Why does the social evaluative threat seem so great? A plausible answer is that the break-up of the settled communities of the past. Although geographical mobility had been increasing, the last half century has been particularly rapid rise.

Although the rises in anxiety that seems to center on social evaluation pre-date the rise in inequality, it is not difficult to see how rising inequality and social status differences may impact on them. Social status carries the strongest messages of superiority and inferiority, and social mobility is widely seen as a process by which people are sorted by ability. We come to see social position as a more important feature of a person's identity. Between strangers it may often be the dominant feature.

Comparing Japan with the USA: Research has revealed a stark contrast between the way people see and present themselves to others in the two countries. In Japan people choose a much more self-deprecating and self-critical way which contrasts sharply with the much more self-enhancing style in the USA. While Americans are more likely to attribute individual successes to their own abilities and their failures to external factors, the Japanese tend to do just the opposite. In the US as greater inequality increases status competition and social evaluative threat, egos have to be propped up by self-promoting and self-enhancing strategies. Modesty easily becomes a casualty of inequality.

There are a host of social problems. To see whether these problems were more common in more unequal societies, we collected internationally comparable data on health and as many social problems as we could find reliable figure for. The list we ended up with included

[1] Level of trust in community and social relations; [2] mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction); [3] physical health and life expectancy; [4] obesity; [5] children's educational performance; [6] teenage births; [6] violence: gaining respect; [7] imprisonment and punishment [8] social mobility: unequal opportunities. In order to be confident that our findings were sound we also collected the data for the same health and social problems – or as near as we could get to the same – for each of the fifth states of the U. S. A.

Hal Horan's notes on chapters 4 and 5 **Chapter 4 Community Life and Social Relations** Authors use a cartoon showing a troubled soul standing outside Heaven, looking at the sign, "A Gated Community."

Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me with greater force than **the equality of conditions**. I easily perceived the enormous influence that this primary fact exercises on the workings of the society.

Should some unforeseen accident occur on the public highway, people run from all sides to help the victim; should some family fall foul of an unexpected disaster, a thousand strangers willingly open their purses. ..

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Slavery which Tocqueville was against, could be maintained in America only if the African Americans were viewed as "other" as "animal." Empathy for others is only possible if the others are viewed as equals.

Hurricane Katrina August 2005 and **break down of trust** leading to the breakdown of a civil city; 1,836 deaths, 700 missing and unaccounted for. Musician Kanye West: "If you see a white family, they are looking for food, a black family they're looting." In New Orleans armed forces were enlisted to keep order, In the Chinese 2008 earthquake **unarmed** soldiers were sent to search and rescue.

"Early socialists and others believed that **material inequality was an obstacle to a wider human harmony**, to a universal brotherhood, sisterhood or comradeship. The data we present in this chapter suggest that **this intuition was sound: inequality is divisive**, and even small differences seem to make an important difference."

All the charts show that **equality of income** is the CHICKEN and **trust** the EGG.

"With greater inequality, people are less caring of one another, there is less **mutuality** in relationships, people have to fend for themselves and get what they can - so, inevitably, there is less trust." [Like shoppers at Best Buy on "black Friday."]

TRUST MATTERS: Regarding fatalities in the Chicago heat wave of 1995, sociologist Eric Klinenberg found that most were residing in low areas of trust and feared opening their windows or venturing out to one of the heat relief stations.

SUVs with tinted windows popularity suggest a preoccupation of looking tough, and feeling safe from others.. In Canada MINIVANS outsell SUVs. Its just the opposite in the U.S. In the UK critics call the SUVs "CHELSEA TRACTORS"

Growing gated communities.

[personalized VA plates—seen on a pickup truck "ARMED." Growing popularity of Revolutionary War "Don't Tread on Me" snake logo was originally meant for the 13 colonies. When used by individuals, the message is likely, "Look out! You have to win my trust. It is not readily available."]

Women's Status: **Three measures**: political participation, employment and earnings, and social and economic autonomy You guessed it. The status is worse in nations and states where there is greater economic inequality.

TRUST BEYOND BORDERS UNITED NATIONS target for spending on foreign development aid is 0.7 per cent of GROSS NATIONAL INCOME. Only Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Netherlands meet that target. More unequal countries significantly lower percentages. UK higher, possibly reflects historical, colonial ties to many developing nations.

5. Mental Health and Drug Use In UK and USA those who use mood altering drugs tied to income inequality.

“MIND, the National Association for Mental Health in the UK publishes a pamphlet called 'How to Improve Your Mental Well-being'. It begins with the premise that:

Good mental health isn't something you have, but something you do.
To be mentally healthy you must value and accept yourself.”

It concludes that people who are mentally well are able to look after themselves, see themselves as valuable people and judge themselves by reasonable, rather than unrealistic, standards. People who don't value themselves become frightened of rejection; they keep others at a distance, and get trapped in a vicious circle of loneliness.”

“Just: as we saw with levels of trust in the previous chapter, there are big differences in the proportion of people with mental illness (from 8 per cent to 26 per cent) between countries. In Germany, Italy, Japan and Spain, fewer than 1 in 10 people had been mentally ill within the previous year; in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and UK the numbers are more than 1 in 5 people; and in the USA.”

Turning now to our other test-bed, the fifty states of the USA, we discovered **something rather surprising**. Alone among the numerous health and social problems we examine in this book, we found **no** relationship between **adult male** mental illness and income inequality among the US states.

Income inequality and mental illness in **adult women** is **not strong**, but too strong to be dismissed as chance.

CLINGING TO THE LADDER

“**affluenza**” “disease” found in affluent societies—high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others, wanting to be famous.

“**status anxiety**” “When we fail to maintain our position in the social hierarchy we are ‘condemned to consider the successful with bitterness and ourselves with shame.’”

[Recent spike in white male drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide and early death among the 35 to 64 age group usually tied to economic downturns. [Many careers are no longer available. Spike in early deaths among white middle age males—Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Correlation?]

“**luxury fever**” Advertisers make us unsatisfied with what we have. [Christmas car ads—one shows a wife looking admiringly and longingly at *the* car passing in the street, not her gift car in the driveway. Comedian George Carlin talked a lot about folks accumulating “all that stuff.”]

“**addiction to income**” More we have the more we feel we need. “Given the importance of social relationships for mental health, it is not surprising that societies with low levels of trust and weaker community life are also those with worse mental health.”

“Within the United States, there is also a tendency for addiction to illegal drugs and deaths from drug overdose to be higher in more unequal states.”

MONKEY BUSINESS Low levels of dopamine and serotonin linked to depression and other disorders. Wake Forest School of Medicine researchers took 20 macaque monkeys and placed them in individual cells, taught them to self-administer cocaine—as much or as little as they wanted. Then placed them in groups. Ones who became dominant were the ones that took low levels of cocaine. In effect the subordinate monkeys were medicating themselves against the impact of their low social status.

Note: words contained in brackets reflect my own observations triggered by the text. HSH

Clergy and Laity United for Justice and Peace
January 12, 2016

The Spirit Level
Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett
Summary Chapter 6
Physical Health and Life Expectancy

First section: Material and Psychosocial Determinants of Health

- The Whitehall researchers found *job stress and loss of control over work* made more of a difference in disease and life expectancy than life style habits that included smoking, obesity and hypertension.

Second section: Life is Short Where Life is Brutal

- Social capital, social status, social connection and utilization of preventive measures contribute to health, wellbeing and a longer life expectancy.
- High tech equipment and money spent on health care do not contribute to a longer life expectancy.

Third section: Health and Wealth

- A baby born in the U.S. has a 40% greater chance of dying during the first year than a baby born in Greece – one the poorer Western democracies.
- The U.S. ranks #37 out of 192 countries for life expectancy.
- Countries with more equal distribution of wealth have a longer life expectancy.

Fourth section: The Big Idea

- Inequality is associated with lower life expectancy, higher rates of infant mortality and poor self-reported health problems.
- What matters in determining life expectancy and health in a society is how evenly the wealth is distributed.

Fifth section: Under Our Skin

- Short term acute stress, does not significantly alter a person's health.
- Chronic stress (E.g. fear of losing a job) has a significant impact on a person's wellbeing and may affect life expectancy.

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Spirit Level – Educational Performance

Basic Logic in “The Spirit Level”

The correlation between Income Inequality and social dysfunction is so strong that Wilkinson and Pickett can assert a causal connection. The authors have described their findings in reference to dysfunctions in community life, mental health , physical health and life expectancy, and now educational performance.

Basic Logic Applied to Educational Performance

- Countries with higher rates of income inequality have lower math and literacy scores than countries with lower rates of income inequality. Figure 8.1 shows this basic relationship by country with the USA having the highest rate of income inequality and Japan the lowest.
- States within our country with higher rates of income inequality also have lower math and literacy scores than states with lower rates of income inequality. Figure 8.2 shows this basic relationship with Louisiana, Mississippi, California, and Alabama most strongly exemplifying this relationship.
- States with higher rates of income inequality have a higher percentage of students dropping out of high school. Figure 8.3 shows this relationship between income inequality and higher rates of a sign of educational performance dysfunction. Again Louisiana, Mississippi, California, and Alabama along with Texas and Kentucky most strongly exemplify this relationship.

How Do Wilkinson and Pickett Support Their Assertion of a Causal Relation?

- The data upon which the country to country graph was based came from the Programme for International Student Assessment which began in the year 2000 with 43 countries participating in the student assessment. The tests have been repeated every three years and typically assess between 4,500 and 10,000 students in each country.
- The authors used comparable data from the U.S. Department of Education for the state to state comparisons.

- Throughout their book Wilkinson and Pickett refer to many other studies to corroborate and enhance their assertions. One example is a study by Douglas Willms, a professor at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. Willms graphed the adult literacy scores in several countries against the participant's parents' education level. He then compared the gradients of several countries. The higher the rates of income inequality in each country correlated to steeper gradients. This pattern of steeper gradients shows that more unequal countries have stronger distinctions between classes of people based on education level.

Wilkinson and Pickett see as underlying this pattern of a causal relationship between income inequality and dysfunction in educational performance the neurological effects of a person seeing himself or herself as socially inferior, as being judged negatively by others. Income inequality aggravates these negative self-images. Feelings of shame and humiliation keep students from performing at their best.

Following their chapter on educational performance, Wilkinson and Pickett examined teen pregnancy and violence, two other areas that show dysfunction in youthful populations. Following those chapters the authors examined imprisonment and punishment, and social mobility. In each area the correlation between income inequality and higher levels of dysfunction remained strong. The cumulative effect of these correlations brings us to their assertion that income inequality is the underlying cause of many forms of social dysfunction.

Wilkinson and Pickett understand the perils of asserting a causal connection between income inequality and broad social dysfunction. Their evidence is strong and the patterns persuasive, still in the later chapters of "The Spirit Level", they consider many arguments against a causal relationship. Their conclusion withstood those challenges. **Seeing income inequality as the cause of social dysfunction leads us to the possibility of addressing many social problems, including poor educational performance, by making every effort to reduce income inequality. The question then becomes: what can we do to reduce income inequality?**

Review of Chapter 8 Educational Performance

By Bob McAdams, CLUJP January 12, 2016