

Review:

Scotland Launch of *The Inner Level: How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone's wellbeing* by Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett at the Mitchel Library, 25 October 2018

The event was hosted by the Mitchell Library Theatre, Glasgow. The Equality Trust and the Mental Health Foundation welcomed Emeritus Professor Richard Wilkinson (University of Nottingham) and Professor Kate Pickett (University of York) to discuss the findings of their recent publication, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everybody's Wellbeing*.

Kate Pickett opened the event by defining the remit of social epidemiologists, stressing the rarity of researchers who are comfortable handling vast quantities of statistical data. She recounted the shared desire of herself and her co-author to update the data covered a decade prior in *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2009), and guided the audience through a series of sample findings such as income inequality and child wellbeing in economically developed nations - noting the relationship between the two.

Taking incarceration rates and income inequality as a further example, Pickett outlined the correlation between vast gaps in wealth and imprisonment rates. The U.K., the U.S., and Singapore boast the largest differences between the richest and poorest in society and the highest incarceration rates. By contrast, Denmark and Japan rated amongst the most equal countries and feature the lowest per capita prison populations.

In the years since publishing *The Spirit Level* (2009), data on mental health has become far more prevalent. Citing the 2018 Mental Health Foundation Survey, Pickett stated that 83% of 18-24 year olds expressed levels of stress beyond what they felt able to cope with. Shockingly, upwards of 16% of young adults surveyed admitted to having self-harmed, with the rate even higher for young women. She cited data from Layte and Whelan (2014) which shows that anxiety over social standing is more prevalent in unequal societies such as the U.K. and the U.S.A. than in more equal nations such as Sweden and Norway.

Closing by considering markers of social standing such as designer bin bags offered by Louis Vuitton and second-hand tote bags currently on sale on eBay, she handed over to her co-author. Taking to the stage, Richard Wilkinson expressed his intention of considering the issues behind the statistics. Grounding his presentation in Glasgow, he sought to examine poverty in context. For example, self-loathing and domestic violence were identified as common manifestations of finding oneself in poverty in countries such as the U.K., India, and Norway, despite the lived realities of poverty varying greatly between contexts. Regardless of geographical location, the similarities in experience and reaction were prevalent.

Yet, despite the stark situation facing communities living in significantly contrasting forms of poverty and inequality, he identified that social interaction (friendship, companionship, and reciprocity) were often as significant as social status (income, wealth, and housing conditions) in determining the health outcomes of individuals. Noting precedent in Sahlins' (1974) suggestion that 'gifts make friends and friends make gifts', he attested that social bonds, mutual respect, warmth, and indeed kindness are of fundamental importance in determining the living experiences of an individual. He closed by noting that engagement in voluntary activities and trust is lower in societies with more significantly income inequalities. This is further evidenced by Knowles and Jayadev (2014) with Italy, Britain, the U.S. and Ireland employing the highest levels of 'guard labour' (security workers).

In closing, Wilkinson entered into dialogue with the audience regarding ways to address income inequalities in countries demonstrating the greatest disparity. He noted the past precedent for trade union movement density correlating with the lowest recorded levels of income inequality within the contemporary U.S. Other suggested means of reducing inequalities within modern societies included meaningful levels of employee representation on employer boards, appointing directors from within existing workforces, and ending tax havens. Notable comments from within the audience included the idea of establishing a form of Citizens Universal Basic Income - perhaps related to Frey and Osborne's (2013) research on future joblessness under ever increasing automation across all sectors.

Amidst talk of the need for economists, anthropologists, epidemiologists, and the like to cooperate in identifying solutions, there was however perhaps a degree of naivety regarding Wilkinson's comments concerning the wealth of opportunities offered by automation. Whilst job shares may represent a means to increase leisure time for some workers worldwide, the circumstances currently leave workers facing ever increasing

precarity - often managing multiple low-hour jobs and working fewer hours, without the safeguard of a guaranteed income. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) note that upwards of four million workers in the U.K. are 'locked' in poverty, despite their employment status.

For those of us with past experience of Wilkinson and Pickett's co-authored work, primarily through *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2009), this new publication offers a sizeable and accessible updated form of social research. Given that within the U.K., continental Europe, and beyond, much of the last decade has entailed sustained periods of austerity, the new focus on emotional and mental wellbeing contained within *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everybody's Wellbeing* (2018) is a welcome contribution to the contemporary struggle against social and economic inequality.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2018). *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everybody's Wellbeing*. Penguin Random House, hardback, pp 352, 9781846147418, £20.00

References

- Frey, C. and Osborne, M. (2013). *The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?* University of Oxford.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018). *Budget 2018: tackling the rising tide of in-work poverty*. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/budget-2018-tackling-rising-tide-work-poverty> [Accessed 26th October 2018].
- Knowles, R. and Jayadev, A. (2014). Guard Labor [Working Paper]. In Wilkinson, R., and Pickett, K. (2018). *The Inner Level with Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett*.
- Layte, R., and Whelan, C. (2014). Who Feels Inferior? A Test of the Status Anxiety Hypothesis of Social Inequalities in Health *European Sociological Review*. Vol. 30, (4)1.
- Sahlins, M. (1974). *Stone Age Economics*. Tavistock Publications.
- Wilkinson, R., and Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. Penguin Random House.

Luke Campbell

PhD Social Work student, University of Edinburgh
Associate Lecturer in Community Education, University of the West of Scotland
Associate Tutor in Adult Education, Community Development and Youth Work, University of Glasgow