Assignment 1: Book Review: The Spirit Level

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BOOK REVIEW: THE SPIRIT LEVEL

The spirit level. Why more equal societies almost always do better, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, London, Allen Lane, 2009

1. *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009) clearly stated and supported with extensive research evidence that there is an association between the level of income inequality and amount of different social problems exists in the developed countries. Less equal societies tend to have larger rates of addiction to illegal drugs, obesity, teenage birth, violent crimes, and a larger proportion of their population in prisons than the societies in which the gap between poor and rich is not too wide. An equal society grants to all its members better physical and mental health, longer life expectancy, more social mobility, better educational outcomes for children, and even shorter working hours. The differences affect health and wellbeing not only of the poor but of all societal strata including the middle class and the rich.

The suggested explanation for this is that “income inequality reflects how hierarchical societies are” (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, p. 27) because hierarchy creates status competition, and higher anxiety for every person since “social evaluative threat” increases (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, p. 37). In other words, in an unequal society you cannot be good enough because you constantly compare your living conditions with the others’ and try to achieve higher status through material wealth. The lack of opportunities and social immobility, lack of control over one’s own life that also characterises an unequal society pushes many of its members to other ways of satisfaction. These could be indulgence in comfort foods and substances, becoming an adult through pregnancy, or committing violent crimes because of real or perceived loss of face and subsequent feelings of shame and injured dignity.

The authors approached social policy from quality-of-life and social justice perspectives (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2012) and provide statistical data on 23 rich countries to show this correlation and to build their interpretation of these facts. The use of meta-analysis of hundreds of research projects makes the findings not only reliable but highly important in the context of policy review and policy development.
2. My own values and ideals make me appreciate the reviewed work. I want all countries to become more just and equal and all people happier and safer. But I cannot ignore some of the biases in methodology of the research and interpretation of its results.

Though meta-analysis is a way of obtaining greater statistical power it may be flawed in different ways. Novella (2012) stated that “if the preliminary studies were poorly designed and biased, the meta-analysis will still reflect the bias of those preliminary studies” (p. 121). In addition to poor initial studies, it might be influenced by so called publication bias, “the tendency for researchers to make more of an effort to publish their study results when the results are interesting, and positive (...) and for journal editors to have a bias toward publishing positive studies (...) as opposed to negative results, which are less interesting” (Novella, 2012, p. 121). Wilkinson and Pickett did not discuss in great detail the quality of studies that served as a basis for their meta-analysis. I do not have the capacity to do this myself therefore I would not say their results are unreliable. But it is necessary to keep in mind that negative results, that is, those that show no correlation between income inequality and social problems, might be not published.

Interpretation of initial data that served as a basis for comparison of the different countries is sometimes problematic. For example, the authors mentioned infant mortality rates – a baby born in the USA “has a 40 per cent higher risk of dying in the first year after birth” (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, p. 80) than baby born in Greece. But infant mortality rates (IMR) can be flawed “depending on a nations' live birth criterion, vital registration system, and reporting practices” (Anthopolos, & Becker, 2010, p. 467). How a particular country defines live birth and how it counts frail or premature infants who die after birth will influence its IMR. Rates of perinatal mortality would balance differences between the countries like the USA that try to save all born babies regardless of week of gestation (Radiolab, 2014) and countries that see severely premature babies as miscarriages. But these rates are not discussed in the book. This is the reason for me to question the reliability of conclusions about the relationships of infant mortality (and health outcomes in general since IMR is part of this general picture) to income inequality.
I would also question the data on mental health, and especially children’s mental health. Being born and raised in another culture I cannot but notice that the notion of mental health and mental diseases is very different here in Canada. For example, before I came I did not realize that anxiety could be seen as a pathological condition and therefore become a diagnosis. I wish I know more about another OECD country in addition to Canada, so I can compare two countries that are discussed in the book and not the countries that I just happen to live in. My idea of differences in diagnostic and categorization of mental conditions is supported by Bakan’s work (2011) in which he describe the development of children’s mental health area of knowledge in the USA. To me it sounded like diagnoses were created out of nothing and expanded due to lobbying of large pharmaceutical corporations. I do not have enough knowledge to prove or disprove this idea myself, but I reserve the right to be uncertain on this point.

The overall numbers sometimes hide huge local differences. Each country might have its own cultural or economic causes that influenced statistics and therefore its own ways of improving situations. Unless we look closer at real differences behind similar statistical data we may lose the main trends. For example, Japan has very low rates of obesity and, of course, this is explained by low income inequality (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, p. 92). But if we look closer to the body mass index (BMI) in Japan we discover that in the 20th century it grows steadily for men and decreases significantly for women (Maruyama, & Nakamura, 2013). Apparently, there are some cultural phenomena that force Japanese women to eat way less than their male counterparts and help to keep the overall number of obese people very low. This fact makes correlation between income equality and low rates of obesity in Japan questionable. What if it is gender inequality?

The authors discovered trends in a large variety of data. The trends are consistent and show correlation between income inequality and social and health problems for the group of rich countries, but if we compare the results of two or three countries from the group, the data will not suggest such a correlation. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) stated that “you can predict a country’s performance on one
outcome from a knowledge of others” (p. 173), but in many cases it does not work. For example, Singapore has the highest income inequalities among all 23 countries discussed in the book (see figure 2.1 on page 17). At the same time, the infant mortality rate in Singapore is the lowest in the world (figure 6.4, p. 82), the number of homicides is relatively low too (figure 10.2, p. 135). Greece has one of the highest rates of obesity among adults (figure 7.1, p. 92), but is more or less in the middle of the group with life expectancy (figure 6.3, p. 82). Canada has excellent average scores in math and literacy among 15-year-olds (figure 8.1, p. 106), and, at the same time, second high score in percentage of overweight children (figure 7.2, p. 93). I do not think the fact of unpredictability of results for some of the social issues destroys the whole notion of correlation between income inequality and problems in general. But it definitely lessens applicability of these results – how you can build policy targeting income inequality to solve a particular issue, if the similar policy in another country does not work.

In spite of all my criticism of the book I like it and I agree with the majority of intermediate and final conclusions. One of the crucial issues to me is trust and lack of trust in a society. Wilkinson and Picket (2009) argue that “high levels of trust mean that people feel secure, they have less to worry about, they see others as co-operative rather than competitive” (p. 57). Connection between inequality in a competitive society and lack of trust in this society is intuitively clear to me. I agree that lack of trust leads to – and is preceded by – deterioration of relationships and destruction of communities. This discussion is in tune with the main points of McKibben’s work (2007) about importance of local communities, and I am glad that I can incorporate the work by Wilkinson and Picket (2009) in a broader context.

Graham, Swift, and Delaney (2012) discussed the ideology of mistrust “that becomes more pervasive in Canadian society” making it more cynical (p. 12). I would not deny the point made by researchers and members of this society, but from my prospective the level of trust in Canada is much higher than in Ukraine. Trust is what struck me the most when I came here. My thoughts on trust are usually sad since the lack of it is a source of numerous problems in Ukrainian society, and I did not see any
way of building the trust on a large scale. Now I am thankful for the idea that this could be done by lowering inequality. I do not know if the new Ukrainian president read this book but so far he, his family, and his team fly in economy-class and wear inexpensive suits. Maybe this is the response to the war as happened in Britain during both world wars (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, pp. 84-85). It certainly encourages me and many other Ukrainians. I would see it as a good sign in any case, but after finishing the book I see it as a sign of hope.

Another idea that struck me on a personal level is stated in epigraph to chapter 7 – “food is the most primitive form of comfort” (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, p. 89). I remember that in the end of 1990s when life was still tough for the majority of Ukrainians, but probably a little better in terms of income than in the beginning of 1990s, suddenly sweets shops appeared on every street corner. You could buy 100 of even 50 grams of cookies, pick ten items from a great variety, not the whole large – and presumably expensive – package, just couple of cookies, sugary or salty, crunchy or soft, chocolate or nutty. What other joys are available to you if you work hard and barely earn your food and shelter? I wonder if the war increased the number of such shops. It might because food is indeed the most primitive and the most accessible form of comfort for the poor and powerless.

3. The book was aimed at wide range of readers, mainly at generally educated and socially concerned people. It is written in relatively simple language and does not require special education in the social sciences or public health to be understood. The statistics are explained with vivid graphs and examples. The authors tried not only to raise awareness around correlations between the level of inequality and problems previously associated with poverty, but also to stimulate readers to act. That is why they needed clear language, and maybe for the sake of clearness some of the ideas were simplified to such a point that they seem to be vague or questionable.

I feel that I am a part of this educated readers’ group because it was engaging reading for me. The book deepened my understanding of certain issues such as importance of local communities and local
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economies, mechanisms that prevent people from leaving poverty and different types of discrimination. For example, I never thought about so called taste (or cultural) discrimination even though it is obvious. We choose our community not only by income, but also by level of education and common taste, so social mobility is restricted by tastes and preferences. The idea of taste discrimination made me think about my own experience as an immigrant here in Canada. In many cases I do feel that my cultural background, my preferences and interests are not a good fit for the group of people I would like to be a part of. I would not call it discrimination, because up to this time people around me are curious and want to learn about my life as much as I want to learn about theirs. But I can easily imagine how such differences exclude less sophisticated persons from a particular society, affecting their confidence and self-esteem.

As a typical part of The Spirit Level audience I found the book extremely useful, because it contributed greatly to my understanding of the societal processes. As for the action piece I have heavy concerns. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) mentioned that “it has been known for some years that poor health and violence are more common in more unequal societies” (p. 18). This book did not reveal any secret, any hidden knowledge regarding social problems and their causes. The knowledge that was already there did not change the system. This reminded me of similar situations in public health. There was a solid knowledge about the harm caused by X-rays to pregnant women or, in the 19th century, about the importance of cleanliness for the success of medical manipulations – but for a number of years this knowledge was not been put into practice. So the knowledge about the nature of inequality from book under review will in all likelihood not change anything either.

What I like the most about The Spirit Level is the chapter discussing solutions. I think that the most brilliant analysis of current social evils and their causes is not complete without an attempt to suggest some kind of way out. Unfortunately, every such analysis, including Bakan (2011), McKibben (2007), and Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), apart from having global vision for changing the whole neo-liberal system, describe only small-scale local solutions that hardly can change the system, or even be distributed to a
number of communities without changing the system.

Wilkinson and Pickett suggested that income inequalities might be decreased by employee-owned companies. They argued that such forms of business will give all the workers the sense of control over their own lives, lessen the salary gap between top management and average workers, and will be socially responsible, unlike modern corporations. “If, for instance, you get to know that some aspect of a design or manufacturing process is harming children’s health, you would want to change it” (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, pp. 255-256). As for me, it is hard to believe that people would refuse larger incomes just because they became owners of the business and would have to make decisions for their own benefit instead of for the benefit of unknown shareholders.

I think the lack of tangible and plausible solutions for global crises is natural. It is hard to say that something that is working for a particular community would work for the whole country or even for several countries. All the authors pick good examples and elaborate on why they are good. Even though there could be no universal answer to the question “What I can do to change the system?” small-scale working solutions are better than nothing.

What is really needed, according to the majority of authors criticizing current systems and social policies, is a mental shift from an individualistic world view to a wide and inclusive vision for every member of a society. “At the most fundamental level, what reducing inequality is about is shifting the balance from the divisive, self-interested consumerism driven by status competition, towards a more socially integrated and affiliative society” (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009, pp. 227-228). Change in societal values and ideologies would inevitably lead to change in current political agenda. I believe that if the reader is looking at the reviewed book as a source of immediate solutions and ways of fixing the broken system she might be disappointed. But if the book is seen as a guide to new ideology explaining why it is needed, it is very practical and therefore useful.
References


