

THE INNER LEVEL, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett,
Book Report and Comment, by David G. Schwartz, M.D., Part 1

This book is game – changer! Income inequality makes us sicker, and it hurts everyone, even the wealthy. What if I told you that a large part of our health problems and most of our economic and social ills could be explained by one factor? Sounds too simplistic? Read on.

These authors, both epidemiologists and one an anthropologist, have presented evidence from numerous peer-reviewed studies and from over 300 reports since the 1970's from many parts of the world. They conclude with confidence that these effects are not due simply to correlation, but inequality is actually causative, according to epidemiological criteria for judging whether the relationships are causal. They also considered whether (1) the cause precedes the effect, (2) whether there is a dose – response relationship, (3) whether conditions improve when egalitarianism increases, (4) the explanation is biologically plausible, (5) if there is no credible alternate explanation for the effect, and (6) whether all the research is consistent. The evidence fulfills all these criteria to support the hypothesis that income inequality does indeed cause all these problems. In their previous book, The Spirit Level, published in 2009, they presented this evidence already, but in this book, published in 2019 they take the further step to explain how it affects human behavior, the history of human society and its economics and social structures, how social class is sharply affected by economics, and they debunk alternative explanations such as the myth of meritocracy and genetics. The countries with the most inequality are the USA and the UK, outlying far from all other countries. Japan and the Scandinavian countries are the most egalitarian. The many graphs poignantly depict the stark correlations. The authors do not propose that income inequality explains all of our problems, but only those that have social gradients, that is, those that vary according to income level. They also suggest steps to take to remedy the situation, to create more equality and economic democracy.

The following conditions are remarkably worse in the countries and states which have the most income inequality: Homicide, suicide, school shootings and other mass murders, mental illness such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, obesity, obsessive eating and shopping, hypertension, lipid (cholesterol) problems, sedentary lifestyle, diabetes, drug addiction, death from overdose, marijuana use, risky alcohol consumption, problem gambling, bullying, low scores of child well being, manipulative

and hostile behavior, intimidation, social and physical aggression, aggressive driving, decreased life expectancy, social anxiety, social judgment, social isolation, dislocation, and alienation, damaged relationships and social quality of life, ego insecurity, low self esteem and self confidence, narcissism (a cover for poor self esteem), decreased empathy, exaggerating one's own talents and achievements, decreased math and reading scores, literacy inequality, decreased civic participation, decreased cultural participation (music, art, etc.), decreased social mobility, sharp class differences based on income, tall class pyramid, status consciousness, turbo-consumerism, materialism, conspicuous consumption, replacing people with things, working hard to appear better than others, increased household debt, defensive self enhancement bias, plastic surgery, excessive CEO salaries, decreased environmental compliance scores, increased per cent of population incarcerated, and lower juvenile age for assigning criminal responsibility, and increased advertising expenditures.

The authors give some anthropological perspective on how dominance hierarchies (like the current state of income inequality) occur.

There is a common misperception that it is natural for humans to be selfish, individualistic, and only the fittest should survive, (by “tooth and claw”). Some religious fundamentalists say that ever since the “Fall of Man,” humans are destined to be selfish and mean. (My comments)

The authors take a look at human history, outlining three main periods of social organization: There were (1) pre-human dominance hierarchies, (2) egalitarian hunting and gathering societies lasting about 200,000 years, in which human brains were the same size as ours, and (3) the recent agricultural societies that started to give rise to inequalities, but had fully entrenched stratified class hierarchies only in the last 5,500 years, beginning with densely populated agricultural societies, then following up with industrial societies. This 3rd phase represents only about 5% of human history.

This demonstrates that humans can be social and cooperative as well as individualistic, depending on which environmental conditions calls forth which response. I think of Muhammed Yunus's book, [A World of Three Zeroes](#), about which I wrote a report (see the archives), in which he said that people are both selfish and unselfish, and he promotes “social capitalism.”

Among pre-humans, the dominance hierarchies were common. A few dominant males held the top of the hierarchy by brute force, keeping a system of ranking (“pecking order”) within the society, and at the very bottom, the weakest subordinates were constantly vigilant, apprehensive, and nervous, and many had bite marks from incurring the displeasure of the higher-ranking animals. Lower ranking animals constantly glance at the dominant male to monitor what he is doing to avoid danger. (Refer to the present day, when the press is constantly preoccupied with reporting on what dangerous thing the President is doing next.) This system is common among many of the apes. Actually not all animal societies are so dominance preoccupied. Some have cooperative social systems within their groups.

Contrast this animal behavioral dominance system with the first humans, hunter-gatherers, with egalitarian societies, covering 95% of human history. They were not genetically programmed to be altruistic. They still had a tendency for dominance and inequality, but for the society to survive, they were capable of responding to the need for cooperation, for big game hunting, and they had to share the meat, or it would rot. Many people were skillful with weapons, not just one dominant person. So they developed a “reverse dominance” strategy. Individuals formed alliances in which everyone united against anyone who became too domineering (like modern democracies). They made decisions by consensus, since they considered everyone as equal. The reverse dominance strategies included methods to curb antisocial behavior, using criticism, ridicule, and public expressions of disapproval, and if all else failed, ostracism, exclusion, or death. They regarded equality as a moral principle. They still recognized people’s unique skills and talents, although politically equal. Many indigenous peoples today still carry on this lifestyle.

Then the agricultural way of life replaced the hunter-gatherer era, dating back to 10,000-12,000 years ago, and it is not certain how the egalitarian system was relinquished. Maybe this was because of the ability to store grain, less cooperation necessary for agriculture, denser population centers, and the introduction of taxation.

Experiments with current humans show more fundamentally social harmony motivations, and they don’t react rationally to maximize personal gain in the way economists often assume, (and in the way the unreal, “reality TV” shows offer great drama and entertainment), but we choose trust and cooperation when possible. It could be that although modern human DNA is

no different from that of early hunter-gatherers who were just learning to cooperate, there could have occurred many epigenetic changes that programmed people to feel more comfortable with social harmony and cooperation.

So we have in our modern human abilities, the capacity for cooperation, sharing, and reciprocity on one hand, and if the situation calls for it, the domination system on the other hand, antisocial, deferring to superiors, scorning inferiors, trying to climb the ladder. Society works better with the first, where everyone can gain. The second is a zero sum game. It's either one up or one down, and not everybody can be "above average," (as in Lake Wobegon.) The current trend is for this second alternative, the domination system, which is now increasing in prevalence, with the increasing gap between rich and poor.

The correlation of income and class is more pronounced in the less equal societies. The domination system in more unequal countries is based mainly on monetary relativism. Except for the really poor, it's not the actual income that matters most, but what the ranking is. The people below the 1% feel poor in relation to their superiors, and they try to rise in status or at least appear to, even if it means spending beyond their means and going in debt in order to gain or maintain status, to feel wealthy in relation to those below. And poor whites on the bottom income rung can try to cling to their race as the only thing left to give more status than people of color (my comment). So no matter what the income, it is never enough. Everyone feels scarcity on every rung on the ladder. This drive to raise status in relation to others results in shame and feelings of worthlessness in those on the lower rungs of the ladder. People at any level feel envy toward those above and scorn for those below. Feelings of scorn and envy are harmful for well being, whether we scorn or are scorned, whether we envy or are envied. This is a toxic stress that isolates people, and never allows them to relax. Thus the aberrant unhealthy behavior and stress-based lifestyle that leads to the many problems found in the unequal societies. In more equal societies, people do not have to spend so much energy on dominance issues and can afford to cultivate positive, cooperative, reciprocal, sharing relationships and build social capital, so important for health and well being.

So in an unequal society, people adapt their abilities to respond to the domination system, as the pre-human primates did, except that money is the source of power instead of brute force. On the other hand, in more equal

societies, people express their abilities for cooperation, which were needed in the hunter-gatherer societies.

A myth that is sometimes used to justify or explain the stratification of income and wealth is the “meritocracy.” This proposes that people with greater skills, intelligence, and aptitudes rise to the top, and those at the bottom are there because they lack those attributes. This book explains the reverse of this causation: People end up stratified because of inequality in income, which obstructs opportunities for upward mobility. The “American Dream” is much more easily achieved in other countries that are more equal, than in the USA. Inequality does not spur economic growth, but it leads to stagnation and instability. More patents are granted per head of population in the more equal countries. The belief in meritocracy is so strong that we tend to judge everyone’s ability and intelligence by one’s position in society. Those near the bottom actually believe their low status reflects their ability, and those at the top have delusions of grandeur, believing that they were naturally endowed with plenty of “the right stuff.” Scientific evidence shows that a person’s position in the hierarchy determines one’s interests and abilities, and also pure luck or chance explains many of the differences. I think that people often forget that it is connections that give people opportunities for employment, advancement, venture capital, marketing, etc. Lower class people connect with lower class people. Where are the opportunities there? Lower income people are also accused of being lazy, but if someone is working 2 or 3 jobs just to stay out of homelessness, where is the laziness I ask? It is very expensive to be poor, not affordable to buy in bulk, higher interest, late fees, fines, and many other ways the poor pay a higher penalty for not being able to be proactive and prevent problems.

Throughout modern history, from Plato on down, upper classes and nobles believed they were made of better stuff than the lower classes, but social classes do not have genetic differences.

IQ tests would seem to indicate that people today are massively more intelligent than their parents or grandparents, but the enormous gains in IQ are socially constructed, not genetic. The cognitive skills that are valued by society have changed substantially over the years and are reflected in IQ scores. Brains develop according to practice and training, showing remarkable “plasticity.” Differences in brain volume between income groups get wider as children grow up, exposed to contrasting home environments. Family income is a more powerful determinant of children’s

cognitive development than maternal depression or single parentage. Studies have shown that cognitive deficits of poor children are correlated with elevated cortisol levels, indicating higher levels of stress. Head Start improves children's performance and partially offsets some of the effects of poverty. Education improves the scores of cognitive function and intelligence in children of higher income families, but they improve less or decline in lower class children. But in some more equal countries, lower class children are more resilient, can more easily raise their scores with education. A study at the University of Bristol (UK) found that children from poor neighborhoods were given worse grades by their teachers than upper class children, confirmed by national tests with remote blinded marking.

Status differentiation and the perception of one's status by others, affect body, mind, and emotions. The "social evaluative threat" is especially stressful. How well children perform and the volume of gray matter in their brains improve with every step up the income ladder, with differences between middle and upper classes as well as between poor and middle, showing that it is not just poverty that affects performance, but income status all the way up. The same holds true for education standards including math and reading scores for more unequal societies, affecting the whole economic spectrum, but the difference is most marked at the bottom of the social ladder. Resilience in children of poor family socioeconomic background, that is, the success in achieving beyond expectations, occurs more often in more equal societies. Unequal countries have more young people in the NEET category (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Less equal states in the U.S. have higher high school dropout rates. Lesser child well being in more unequal countries cannot be explained by family breakdown or single parentage. It is the poverty common in single parent households that makes the difference.

So the meritocracy theory is bogus. Privilege begets privilege, more forcefully in more unequal societies. Inequality, like poverty, creates intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, and wastes enormous human talent and potential.

Social class distinctions are enforced by certain manners and etiquette, characteristic of a certain class. These manners are not necessarily related to courtesy or consideration for others, but word choice, grammar, accent, lifestyle, and other preferences. In more unequal societies, people of upper

social status exhibit more antisocial behavior, including cutting off other drivers, taking sweets intended for children, etc.

For some recent historical perspective on class, in this country in the 1920's, inequality reached a peak, until the Great Depression and its aftermath up until 1970. With the New Deal, the economy underwent massive restructuring, with changes in tax code, support for labor, more social programs, and a social safety net. Inequality diminished to a great extent, and many of the social problems associated with inequality were greatly reduced. Symbols of refinement and class superiority and aping the behavior of the upper classes became less pronounced. New styles of music, dance and fashion started percolating up from the lower classes instead of the downward trickle.

Then from the 1980's on, inequality rose, starting with Reaganomics, and a resurgence of class hierarchy and rigidity ensued. In just 20 years, the percent of women who would marry into a different class dropped from 61% to 44%. Since then up until now, the increase of homelessness, the proportion of children living in poverty, the weakening of the social safety net, and employees pushed into nominal "self-employment," all occurred in this era, and with it the influence of big money in politics, the subversion of democracy, and large corporations and rich individuals escaping much of their tax liability.

Other class effects: In-law conflicts due to class difference create more problems than ethnic or religious differences. The arts are considered the domain of the well off in the more unequal societies, leading to cultural impoverishment of whole societies. Class hierarchy inhibits the formation of friendships, because friendships imply equality and equal respect. This diminishes our social capital. In more unequal societies, it is easier for callousness and cruelty and disregard for the suffering of others regarded as inferior. More unequal societies have more of their population in prison, and not just due to higher crime rates. Harsher and more punitive and longer sentencing for lesser crimes, and the age of criminal responsibility much lower into childhood. This reflects how people of unequal societies trust each other much less. The "racialization" of class reflects people's belief, in less equal societies, that genetic differences determine their status. The belief that Jews made up a distinct race contributed to the perpetration of the holocaust. There are more genetic differences within a given race than there are genetic differences between races, yet people with class hierarchy

consciousness tend to believe falsely that races have distinct genetic differences. European Americans put more emphasis on genetics than African Americans do.

Overall, income inequality damages the whole society and makes it less stable, less resilient. Unequal societies faced with mass scarcity are more likely to collapse than more equal societies. How would we handle the equivalent of a Great Depression now? We have to ask ourselves, do we prefer a society like that of the apes, or would we prefer have a more truly human, (humane) social structure?

What can be done to make our societies more equal, and what are the chances that it will occur? In part 2, I look at the authors' suggestions for making a transition to a more egalitarian way of life.