

Imprisoned by Inequality

This paper draws upon a combination of material presented by Professor Kate Pickett at the General Assembly's Annual Meetings in April this year and other material from The Equality Trust.

Work and inequality

In the 1950s through to the 1970s the idea of "Executive Stress" was accepted largely without question. That is to say, it was believed that if you were a top business executive or someone with a huge amount of responsibility you were the most likely person to have a heart attack, a stroke or cardio vascular disease. Yet it was an idea totally unsupported by evidence. When evidence was collected and analysed, it clearly showed that it was people in the lowest paid jobs, with little or no control over their work, who were at the highest risk of heart disease. However, despite the idea that those in top jobs suffer most stress has been shown to be wrong, it continues to be drawn upon when justification is sought for the massive remuneration paid to those at the top of big businesses and organisations, when the vast bulk of workers only see their pay increasing at or below the rate of inflation.

Health and inequality

The link between low income and poor health is also evidenced by comparisons of life expectancy with levels of affluence in localities within the UK. A striking example of this is two areas within the city of Glasgow. In Carlton, one of the poorest areas, life expectancy for a man is 54, whereas in Lenzie, the most affluent part of the city, it is 82. Life expectancy for a man in Carlton is less than that for a man in India. In India millions of men live in extreme poverty on less than \$2 a day. Nobody in Glasgow lives in that extreme poverty but their life expectancy is worse. Low male life expectancy in Carlton is clearly not explained by levels of absolute poverty; it is a matter of people's incomes relative to one another in the society in which they live.

In Glasgow the gap in life expectancy between the wealthiest and the poorest areas is particularly stark, but in cities and towns throughout the UK it is common to find a gap of over 10 years and there is a recurrent pattern everywhere showing life expectancy gradually rising the more prosperous the area is. Despite numerous studies undertaken over many decades showing this persistent pattern, health inequality in the UK has not reduced.

In January this year the World College of Paediatrics and Child Health published a report on children's health in the UK. The Guardian reported it and they called it a "landmark report". It wasn't a landmark report. It just showed again huge inequalities in health for children in the UK. It said that infant mortality rate was twice as high at the bottom of UK society as it is at the top. Exactly the same as had been seen in the Marmot report in 2010. Exactly the same as had been seen in the Black report in 1980. The UK still has shaming health inequalities in infant mortality. The latest report also reiterated what previous studies had shown that child wellbeing is worse in the UK than in other European countries. Research also indicates that

overall levels of physical illness and rates of mental illness and obesity are lower in more equal societies.

Trust, status and inequality

Using social cohesion and the relationships between us as a case study helps illustrate how the effects of income inequality seep into our psyche, altering the way individuals and groups of people behave towards and interact with one another.

Trust is a key measure of social cohesion and relationships within a society. In the more equal developed countries about two-thirds of the population thinks that other people can be trusted. In more unequal countries it drops to about a fifth. The extent to which people trust one another has a very profound effect on us because trust really matters to our day to day lives. If you are a woman walking home late at night, it is going to feel very different in a country where most people trust other to one where few do. If you are a young man walking along a street and you see another group of young men on a street corner similar differences in feeling will arise depending upon the society you live in. This trust or lack of trust of others permeates our relationships at school, relationships at work and relationships in public places. What a wide inequality gap seems to do is make people more aware of their position in society, make them more aware of what other people think of them, make status more important to them and make them more anxious. Lack of trust is associated with a variety of other social issues including happiness, homicides and health. Low levels of trust and a lack of social capital prevent strong relationships forming. This lack of strong relationships with others in society makes homicide more likely and prevents the sort of support networks which help improve a person's health.

Inequality also impacts on our concerns about and perceptions of our status within society. Across the board from the poorest to the richest, there is more status anxiety in high inequality societies. If you live in a more unequal country whether you are rich or poor you will worry more about your status than you would in a more equal society. The differences in levels of status anxiety are somewhat bigger for those on the lowest incomes, but they persist all the way to the richest tenth.

So, for some people living in a more unequal society makes them withdraw, makes them anxious and depressed. Others have the opposite reaction. They do what we call colloquially "big themselves up". They present themselves as more prosperous and successful than they really are. Those who do this also tend to live beyond their means in this land of ready credit.

Inequality and crime

The link between economic inequality and both property crime and violent crime is well established.

Rates of violence are higher in more unequal societies. This finding holds up in many different contexts, when looked at via different methodologies and after controlling for other determinants of crime such as low income, unemployment, and teen birth rates.

Economic inequality affects violence by influencing the way we think, act and relate to others. It stimulates social competition which can lead to violence and curtails opportunities for some, giving rise to a sense of hopelessness which incites fear, violence and murder.

Less equal societies with low levels of trust may lack the social capacity to prevent violence and create safe communities. Experiences of inferiority may make someone less inclined to behave in a socially desirable way. This materialises as increased aggressive behaviour and high crime rates.

The murder rate has been found to be higher in more unequal societies. Criminologists in the US have assessed that only about a third of the differences in levels of imprisonment among different societies is due to differences in crime rates. Mostly it is explained by differences in how harsh societies are in judging those who have infringed social norms. Those convicted of crime in more unequal societies tend to be judged more harshly and consequently be more likely to be sent to prison and for longer, if convicted of a crime, rather than be given a community sentence. However, in those societies the re-offending rates are also higher.

Economic growth and inequality

Some people used to argue that you needed a certain level of inequality for economic growth; economists have proved this to be wrong. It was also argued that inequality is a spur to aspiration and creativity, yet patents per capita are lower in more unequal societies. It was further argued that inequality spurs social mobility, yet social mobility is lower in more unequal societies. The ideas that have been advanced in defence of inequality have progressively been found to be false, just as the idea of executive stress was found to be.

Tackling inequality

Income inequality can be reduced by measures to reduce inequality before tax, measures to reduce inequality after tax or a combination of both. Before tax income inequality can be narrowed by raising the statutory minimum wage, requiring the publication of the ratio between the highest and lowest paid in organisations, strengthening trade unions, and increasing workplace democracy. Income differences after tax can be reduced by making income tax more progressive, stopping tax avoidance and ending tax havens.

Such changes would need a public mandate of some sort. There is one, but it is not an electoral one. The British Social Attitude Survey asks random large samples of the British public, year after year after year, what they think about income inequality. 80% of those surveyed thought inequality is too high and would like to see something done about it. They think inequality is lower than it actually is, but they would like it to be even lower than what they think it is.

What is actually happening in the world where we are trying to activate change? The answer is that in the UK, at national level, not a lot. There is quite a lot going on internationally. Oxfam now has a 10-year campaign on inequality. They go to the World Economic Forum every year and make a big fuss about inequality. A few years ago they pointed out that the 85 richest people on the planet own the same wealth as the 3.5 billion poorest people. We also at international level have the

sustainable development goals. All 193 countries that belong to the UN have signed up to the UN sustainable developments goals for 2030 and have said they will try to meet these 17 goals. One of those goals is to reduce inequalities within and between countries. These goals apply to rich countries, poor countries, emerging economies, global south, and global north. So we have an international framework. At local level we have seen quite a lot. Several local authorities have established Fairness Commissions. They have investigated how they could reduce income inequalities within their local areas and many have made recommendations that have resulted in beneficial change.

Kate Pickett and her colleague, Richard Wilkinson, are continuing their research on the impacts of economic inequality. Their latest publication for the Fabian Society, "A Convenient Truth", focuses on the links between inequality and the environment, and a new book by them is soon to be published. It is now for us as Unitarian communities and as individuals, seeing the widespread damaging impact of economic inequality in our country, to reflect on how we can campaign for greater economic fairness.

Paul Wheeler