OUR SENSITIVITY TO INEQUALITY

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Problems

Income inequality

Red line on graph
Neither health nor social problems are related to national income per head

Index of:
- Life expectancy
- Math & Literacy
- Infant mortality
- Homicides
- Imprisonment
- Teenage births
- Trust
- Obesity
- Mental illness – incl. drug & alcohol addiction
- Social mobility

Wilkinson & Pickett, The Spirit Level
Health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries

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Source: Wilkinson & Pickett, The Spirit Level

www.equalitytrust.org.uk
Child well-being is better in more equal countries
Child Wellbeing is not related to National Income per head
Child Wellbeing is lower in more unequal countries (UNICEF Index 2013)

Changes in inequality and child wellbeing (UNICEF Index)

Pickett & Wilkinson, Pediatrics. (forthcoming)
In summary... bigger income gaps lead to deteriorations in:-

**Social Relations**
- Child conflict
- Homicide
- Imprisonment
- Social capital
- Trust

**Human Capital**
- Child wellbeing
- High school drop outs
- Math & literacy scores
- Social mobility
- Teenage births

**Health**
- Drug abuse
- Infant mortality
- Life expectancy
- Mental illness
- Obesity
Age-specific mortality and income inequality in 21 OECD countries

Regression coefficients for Gini

Early-life income inequality predicts self-reported health in later life

Adult health is associated with societal income inequality experienced in childhood up to 80 years earlier.

“Controlling for demographic and economic factors, we find both men and women are...more likely to report poorer health if income was more unequally distributed during the first years of their lives. The association is robust to alternative specifications of income inequality and time trends and remains significant even when we control for differences in overall childhood health. Our results constitute prima facie evidence that adults' health may be adversely affected by the income inequality they experienced as children.”
Income differences increase social class differentiation

Bigger income differences:

- Class becomes more important
- The social pyramid is higher and more hierarchical
- The quality of social relations deteriorates
Psychosocial risk factors for ill health

- Low social status
- Weak social connections
- Stress in early life (pre- and postnatally)
What kind of stressful tasks raise stress hormones most?

Relative Risk of death

Even low levels of stress increase death rates

Health Survey for England 1994-2004.  n=68,222; deaths = 8365

Russ TC, Stamatakis E, Hamer M, Starr JM, Kivimäki M, Batty GD.
The Jekyll & Hyde of Public Health?

• **Social status** (dominance hierarchies, pecking orders) are orderings based on power, coercion and privileged access to resources – regardless of the needs of others.

• **Friendship** in contrast, is based on reciprocity, mutuality, social obligations, sharing and a recognition of each other’s needs.
Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* 1651
Women’s preference for more masculinized faces is stronger in more unequal societies

Companion
Spanish: Compañero; French: Copain

from the Latin “Con” (with)
and “Pan” (bread)
- someone with whom you eat bread
“Gifts make friends and friends make gifts”

*Stone Age Economics* (1974)

Marshall Sahlins

ABSTRACT: “We begin by describing psychological, social, and biological correlates of the **Dominance Behavioral System**. Extensive research suggests that externalizing disorders, mania proneness, and narcissistic traits are related to heightened dominance motivation and behaviors. Mania and narcissistic traits also appear related to inflated self-perceptions of power. Anxiety and depression are related to **subordination and submissiveness**, as well as a desire to avoid subordination. Models of the DBS have received support from research with humans and animals; from self-report, observational, and biological methods; and use of naturalistic and experimental paradigms.”
Mental illness is more common in more unequal societies

Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level*
Rising Narcissism & Income Inequality in the USA

Inequality data from World Top Incomes Database
Schizophrenia is more common in more unequal countries.
Two recent studies show that inequality increases conspicuous consumption and consumerism

- People in more unequal areas of the USA are more likely to buy high status cars
- Data from Google searches shows that people in more unequal states are more likely to search for status goods
Working hours are longer in more unequal countries

Self-enhancement is more common in more unequal societies.

Depression is more common in more unequal states

Ecstasy: a treatment for social anxiety?

“(My parents) put...down...most of their imagined shortcomings to their not having been educated, education (was) to them a passport to everything they lacked: self-confidence, social ease and above all the ability to be like other people. Put simply and as they themselves would have put it, both my parents were shy, a shortcoming they thought of as an affliction while at the same time enshrining it as a virtue. I assured them, falsely, that everybody felt much as they did but that social ease was something that could and should be faked. ‘Well, you can do that,’ Dad would say, ‘you've been educated,’ adding how often he felt he had nothing to contribute. ‘I'm boring, I think. I can't understand why anybody likes us. I wonder sometimes whether they do, really.’
People in more unequal countries trust each other less
People trust each other less in more unequal countries

The effects of inequality: 
– a two stage process?

1. adult experience of inequality
2. passed on to children
   – incl. epigenetics
...research is demonstrating that external social conditions, especially our subjective perceptions..., can influence our most basic internal biological processes—namely, the expression of our genes. ...social-environmental factors can substantially alter the expression of literally hundreds of genes... ...although as adults we are often physically separated from those around us, our presence in different social groups means that we are transcriptionally connected, giving rise to a human metagenome that has implications for collective health and behavior.

We review studies with human and nonhuman species that examine the hypothesis that epigenetic mechanisms, *particularly those affecting the expression of genes implicated in stress responses*, mediate the association between early childhood adversity and later risk of depression.

The resulting studies provide evidence consistent with the idea that *social adversity, particularly that involving parent–offspring interactions, alters the epigenetic state and expression of a wide range of genes, the products of which regulate hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal function.*