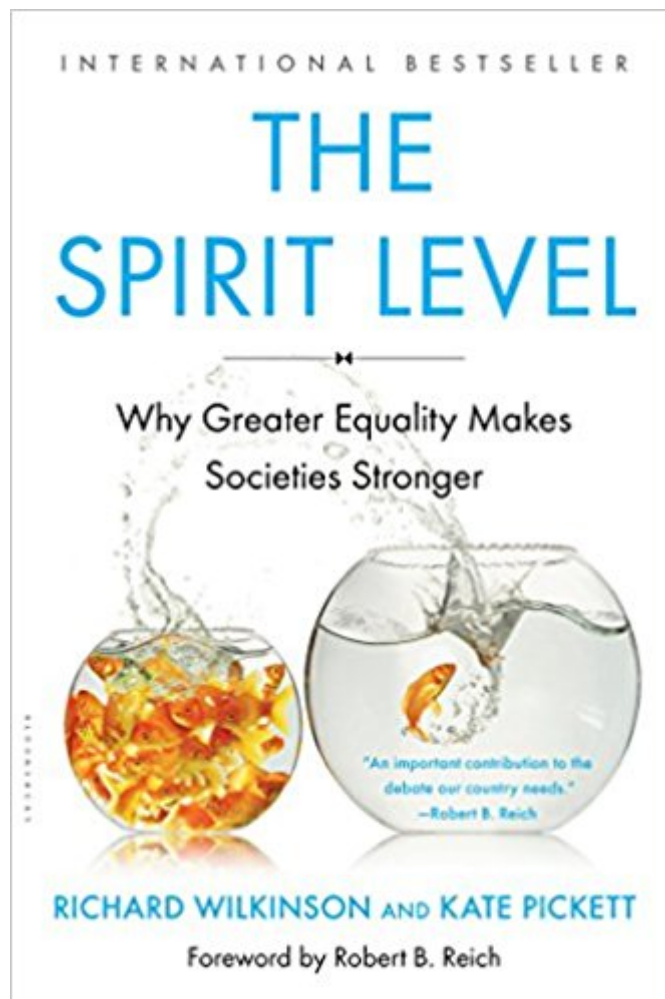




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The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger



Synopsis

It is a well-established fact that in rich societies the poor have shorter lives and suffer more from almost every social problem. The Spirit Level, based on thirty years of research, takes this truth a step further. One common factor links the healthiest and happiest societies: the degree of equality among their members. Further, more unequal societies are bad for everyone within them-the rich and middle class as well as the poor. The remarkable data assembled in The Spirit Level exposes stark differences, not only among the nations of the first world but even within America's fifty states. Almost every modern social problem-poor health, violence, lack of community life, teen pregnancy, mental illness-is more likely to occur in a less-equal society. Renowned researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett lay bare the contradictions between material success and social failure in the developed world. But they do not merely tell us what's wrong. They offer a way toward a new political outlook, shifting from self-interested consumerism to a friendlier, more sustainable society.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Wilkinson and Pickett make an eloquent case that the income gap between a nation's richest and poorest is the most powerful indicator of a functioning and healthy society. Amid the statistics that support their argument (increasing income disparity sees corresponding spikes in homicide, obesity, drug use, mental illness, anxiety, teenage pregnancies, high school dropouts— even incidents of playground bullying), the authors take an empathetic view of our ability to see beyond self-interest. While there are shades of Darwinism in the human hunt for

status, there is evidence that the human brain—with its distinctively large neocortex—evolved the way it has because we were designed to be attentive to, depend on, and be depended on by others. Wilkinson and Pickett do not advocate one way or the other to close the equality gap. Government redistribution of wealth and market forces that create wealth can be equally effective, and the authors provide examples of both. How societies achieve equality, they argue, is less important than achieving it in the first place. Felicitous prose and fascinating findings make this essential reading. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Wilkinson and Pickett make an eloquent case that the income gap between a nation’s richest and poorest is the most powerful indicator of a functioning and healthy society|Felicitous prose and fascinating findings make this essential reading.

• Publishers Weekly (starred)“In this fascinating sociological study, the authors do an excellent job of presenting the research, analyzing nuances, and offering policy suggestions for creating more equal and sustainable societies. For all readers, specialized or not, with an interest in understanding the dynamics today between economic and social conditions.

• Library Journal“The Spirit Level will change the way you think about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, especially if you live in the United States. You will reexamine what it means to be successful, how you will seek and achieve personal satisfaction, and what you owe your fellow citizen.

• Jo Perry, BookBrowse.com“It has taken two experts from the field of public health to deliver a major study of the effects of inequality on society. Though Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett are British, their research explores the United States in depth, and their work is an important contribution to the debate our country needs.

• Robert B. Reich, from the foreword“Might be the most important book of the year.

• Guardian“Fascinating and deeply provoking|The Spirit Level does contain a powerful political message. It is impossible to read it and not to be impressed by how often greater equality appears to be the answer, whatever happens to be the question. It provides a connection between what otherwise look like disparate social problems.

• David Runciman, London Review of Books

It’s amazing how effectively this book peels back the veil that obscures hidden connections between seemingly unrelated modern social problems. In addition to providing me with a powerful new lens through which to view (and think about solving) a wide range of socio-political issues, I think The

Spirit Level can just about serve as a type of self-help manual for avoiding some of the miserable hidden traps that inequality sets for us as individuals. This book is seriously brilliant.

Inequality is the consequence of our corporatist state. Corporations only care about stock profits and this quarter's profits. Combine this with changing tax code and a political system where both parties serve the corporations, we have gotten a dramatic uptake in inequality in the USA.

Economists like Stiglitz and Krugman have been talking about rising inequality for a while now. This book covers what they largely do not talk about, that is, the health and social consequences of inequality. Pickett and Wilkerson are obvious experts and they provide numerous references for the reader. Our current political system is literally making us chronically ill and dying younger. This effect is independent of poverty. As a physician with children, their message is clear. The text is well written (and dense). It has been a slow read for me. I am using this text as a reference for a lecture I plan to give our medical students this spring. Highly recommended.

I began reading this book while on a mission trip in Honduras. Being in that setting caused me to be very open to the book's message and brought life to all its stats. The Spirit Level is a very analytical approach to the topic of income inequality that is presented in an understandable format. The first couple chapters set the scene in describing the difference between wealth and inequality and how our success in getting things may actually be setting up cultural failure. Some of the points are key insights to human behavior. Pages 36-37 are very fascinating in describing the evolution of self-esteem. We now have a population of people who put off great self-esteem but not because they are accomplished or talented. Rather, these seemingly confident individuals continue to tell themselves they are right about everything and in turn are the most racist, violent and insensitive people in our culture. By this same token, many people today measure success only as in comparison to others. They must continually show to themselves and others that they have more than most of those around them. This promotes a cultural values system that leads to great inequality. The majority of the book then goes on to detail all the negative social consequences that seem to come as a result of inequality. Countries are listed in accordance to their level of inequality. Beyond that, the book lists each of the 50 American states according to the same criteria. Each chapter is then dedicated to a social problem everyone would agree is a cultural negative (violence, mental illness, obesity, teenage pregnancies and poor education). Research results are given on each topic that show with amazing consistency how inequality (whether in a country or state) causes more of the negative social reality. These parallels hold true whether the country (or state) is

rich or poor. It is simply the level of inequality that seems to make the condition worse. The final chapters then give some suggestions toward correcting this disparity. One of these was a solution to global warming in which everyone is given credits for waste or pollution allocation. Poorer people who are then not going to use all of theirs could sell them to richer people who want/need more to meet their standard of living. This would be a voluntary redistribution of wealth that would work to correct multiple social wrongs. Another option outlined was the idea of bringing democracy to the workplace in a way more similar to our political system in America. In our country, everyone gets one vote for our politicians, but if money is how we vote in the marketplace, then those who have less money aren't able to have their votes be heard. The book contains much more than I could describe here and goes into greater detail on the subjects in which I did mention. I will say that I was curious and possibly skeptical going in. The book has made me more aware, though, of the crippling effect of poverty and inequality even within my own southern community. If there were five books I could force everyone in the world to read, this would be one of them.

I normally do not review books, especially textbooks. However, this book is so amazing. It is an interesting read and the authors use evidence to back on their statements. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It has the ability to change the way people think about equality and inequality.

When the global financial crisis hit three years ago there were some signs that equity would become an issue across the world. There was much talk about the excessive salaries paid to bankers and some discussion about the obscene amounts of money the gamblers in the money market took, even after they incurred massive losses for their shareholders and clients. But today this interest has faded. There is no rival to the capitalist system, as there was when the Soviet Union threatened, and many of those at the top of the tree see no reason to pay attention to those at the bottom, (with some notable exceptions such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Ted Turner). But going beyond retribution for the actions of bankers and financiers, there is good reason to aim for a more equitable society. British researchers Professor Richard Wilkinson of the University of Nottingham Medical School and Professor Kate Pickett of the University of York lead the research finding a link between inequality and dysfunction in societies. Wilkinson and Pickett draw on a wide range of statistics from across the world. They report, for example, that: * there is a clear relationship between greater inequality and higher homicide rates. In the more inequitable United States, the murder rate is more than four times the British rate, about four times the Australian rate and more than twelve times the Japanese rate; * teenage birth rates are closely related to inequality, with the US showing a teenage

birth rate of 52.1 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19, more than four times the European Union average, three times that in Australia and ten times higher than Japan; and* infant mortality is related to inequality, with the United States having a rate of seven infant deaths per 1000 live births, compared with Australia's 4.5 deaths and Japan's rate of just over three;* as poorer countries get richer, life expectancy increases rapidly. But then the rate of improvement slows down and eventually, as countries get richer and richer, the relationship between economic growth and life expectancy disappears. There are some other remarkable observations. In Britain during the war decades, increases in life expectancy for civilians were twice that in the rest of the twentieth century. The nation's nutrition improved with rationing during the Second World War, but this was not true for the First and material living standards declined during both wars. Both wartimes had full employment and narrower income differences as a result of deliberate government policy to promote co-operation with the war effort. There are various ways of measuring inequality in countries. We can compare the top and bottom 20 per cent of the population, for example, or the proportion of all income that goes to the poorer half. To avoid accusations of picking and choosing, Wilkinson and Pickett used measures provided by official agencies and compared the top and bottom 20 per cent. On this measure Australia is no longer in the high ranking of equality. Japan, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands all rank ahead of us, as we might expect. But even Switzerland, Canada and France are relatively more equal. The United Kingdom is close to Australia while United States and Portugal are more unequal. The similar ranking of Australia and Britain surprised me. Coming from Britain in the 1960s I would have said that Australia was a much more equitable society. But this view may have been coloured by other factors. Australia promised a "fair go" and class differences did not appear to be the obstacle they were in the United Kingdom. Anyone could make it. Australians were proud of their "mateship" and thought there was a difference between the way they related to each other and the way the British related. You hear little today about the Australian egalitarian spirit. In the mid-seventies higher economic growth rates took over as the prime objective. Union influence waned and how the economic cake was shared became less and less of an issue. It was assumed that as long as the cake was growing, we were all better off. The Labor Party was the party of social justice, but lost the nerve to push this in its campaigns. Labor failed to whip up its electoral base in support of the perfectly equitable Resources Rent Tax, perhaps fearing that making this a class issue would backfire. The tax unquestionably will have an impact on the sector by, for example, damping the super profits that might attract some investors to a development and thus delaying investment. But this is precisely what is required when we have the problem of a two speed economy. Slowing one sector down and transferring some of the

taxation from this sector elsewhere, moderates the speeds. Labor's overall policy slogan was Simpler, Fairer, Stronger, but nobody pushed the Fairer angle too hard. Unfortunately the poorer segments of the community are disadvantaged by being located in safe seats where they are unable to sway the political balance in their own self-interest. Few middle class voters recognise the benefits across the spectrum from a fairer society as no-one has sold this in a politically inspiring way.

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