

# Social Science Bites

A new podcast series with  
leading social scientists

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

In association with  
 **SAGE**

# Danny Dorling on Inequality

---

David Edmonds: *When in 2004 steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal paid a cool £57million for a property in London's Kensington Palace Gardens, it was - at the time - the most expensive home in Britain. Mittal has since bought additional properties for much more: and in any case the price looks a bargain compared to his yacht. In the rich world, the gap between rich and poor over the past few decades has grown dramatically: not just in terms of wealth, but on other indicators too -there's been a growing gap in life-expectancy, for example. Danny Dorling is a social scientist - a human geographer. He's analysed trends in inequality and presented the data in novel and compelling ways. He claims inequality is bad for everyone: not just for the poor, but even, bizarrely, for Mr Mittal and the rest of the super rich.*

Nigel Warburton: *Daniel Dorling, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

Danny Dorling: Thanks for having me.

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're going to focus on is inequality. Could you just begin by sketching what the current state is of inequality in the rich world?*

Danny Dorling: Currently inequality in the rich world is at a high, it's been rising for several decades and now if you measure it in terms of life expectancy, differences between people in particular rich countries, or in terms of income and wealth differences, it's the highest it's been since around about the 1920s, maybe a little bit earlier.

Nigel Warburton: *So what you're saying is the disparity between rich and poor is absolutely massive now, much higher than it's been for years.*

Danny Dorling: Yes. But of course people are much better off than they were 80 or 90 years ago. But the gaps between groups of people have become as wide again as they were back then, and that is staggering, it's one of the sort of defining things of our times, and it will probably be one of the things that people look back on in the future and say 'this was a time of great inequality.'

Nigel Warburton: *Why do you think this has happened now?*

Danny Dorling: To put it very crudely, a lot of us took our eyes off the ball and didn't fight enough to keep it down. There were some groups who thought inequality wasn't necessarily a bad thing in a time of riches in that a few people getting richer would help drag everybody else up. But also there are wider forces that make you more unequal unless you do something about it.

Nigel Warburton: *What sort of forces are you talking about there?*

Danny Dorling: If you leave a group of people alone there will tend to be a variety, a variation between those people. Some people will like making money and if you let them do it, they'll make more money: they're driven by trying to make money. If you don't curtail their wish to make money they'll become richer and richer and you then get imbalances of power. If you simply leave particular social situations to run their course you tend to get growing inequalities in income and then even bigger inequalities in wealth - and then, with a lag, you see inequalities of people's life chances and some of the most important things such as education and health.

Nigel Warbuton: *So you've almost touched on it there, but why should it matter that there are these inequalities. If people reach a threshold level of income, why would it matter if there are some very rich people?*

Danny Dorling: Well you can carry on quite a long time with high and growing inequalities and it not appears to matter terribly much, particularly if your economies as a whole are growing. So if the entire countries are becoming richer and rich people are becoming much, much richer, but poor people are getting a little bit more than the generation before them, it's possible to keep things going like that. There are great ecological problems with doing that: your consumption levels are absolutely enormous, and it isn't sustainable in the long term. But one reason that inequalities have become so high again is that it's not that uncomfortable becoming more unequal if you're all becoming a bit richer. What's really, really uncomfortable is when you have economic decline and big inequalities; and what's almost impossible to live with is when you have economic decline, most people getting poorer, the poor getting very poor, and a few people still getting richer.

Nigel Warburton: *Is that because people are just envious of the rich?*

Danny Dorling: The argument about envy fitted with when you had growing economies and everybody becoming a bit better off and the rich becoming more better off than the poor. What happens in the time when you have economic decline is it switches from being envy to being disgust. And so it's not just people saying 'in a time of austerity ' wish I could be the one rich person.' What you hear people saying is, 'In a time of austerity, what are they doing with 50% pay rises?'

Nigel Warburton: *Well, one commonly used argument there is that the people that get those huge pay rises earn them. There's something they do by their own merit that somehow justifies the difference in pay.*

Danny Dorling: This is an argument that you could try to sell when you have economic growth. The very rich could say you're all having growth because of us. It becomes unsustainable when entire countries are becoming poorer for the very rich just to say 'we're doing something that's so very valuable that you need to give us a 50% pay rise this year.' You know, you really have to believe that without them everything would fall apart.

Nigel Warburton: *Well, think about sport: there are people who can run a marathon in under three hours and that's quite phenomenal. Now there are huge individual differences there. What makes you so sure there aren't individual differences in terms of their capacity to generate income, to do things which are worthwhile for society?*

Danny Dorling: I don't think that differences in ability to run between human beings are that different. Human beings are remarkably similar animals. I mean, if you look at leg length and height and what we actually do and are capable of, I don't think we are this sort of set of almost different species that can do different things. The extent to which people can walk and run very much depends on the environment in which they are brought up to walk and run in. And of course you can always take an individual and train them up to behave in a particular way. You can do the same with a dog. That doesn't mean that that dog's a particularly special dog: it means somebody's trained that dog to behave in that particular way. What's remarkable about human beings is how similar we are. We all have, *almost* all have, binocular vision; we all have an opposable thumb; we all have a brain of a particular size, it doesn't vary that much - in fact you don't want a really big one because it's actually associated with a form of mental illness. But we're very bad at recognizing how similar we are; and for peculiar reasons we're very good at looking at the slight differences and then trying to make out they're terribly important.

Nigel Warburton: *You seem to be saying that inequality is a bad thing on the whole. Is it bad because it leads to certain other ills, or is it intrinsically bad?*

Danny Dorling: There are always differences between people and there are always variations, but where inequalities are not based on something which is real, they can lead to a very sad situation. One of my favourite examples is singing. There's a lovely history of human beings singing, people have written about Neanderthals singing and whether they sang. And if you look at the distribution of singing, how many people are used to singing, it's very high in parts of Africa. It's now pretty low in parts of Europe. But the idea that only a few people can be great singers - they have to win X-Factor and then we give them records. What ends up happening is that most people stop singing and you end up putting a few people on pedestals and saying what wonderful

singers they are. Well it's not just singing it's story telling, all kinds of your inability, you can get a 'winner takes all' society where most people feel that their achievements aren't good enough and a few people are told that they're so good that they're beginning to believe they're super human.

Nigel Warburton: *In the singing example you're saying that potentially almost anybody has the ability to sing at a certain, quite good level, and it's only social factors which are going to stop them doing that. Now are you saying then that economic inequality is one of the obstacles to various kinds of achievement, or are you saying that quite apart from it's consequences, gross economic inequality is just wrong, it's a bad thing?*

Danny Dorling: It's quite hard to tell whether economic inequality is just a bad thing or whether it's inefficient because there are so many overlapping reasons why high levels of inequality cause harm in all kinds of ways that it's very hard to disentangle. It's a bit like saying 'Is there a good kind of way of smoking tobacco?' The key thing about tobacco is - although I quite happen to quite like tobacco - it is just bad for you. Tobacco is just not good, and inequality is simply not good. I'm not saying you should all be completely equal, but great levels of inequality just tend to bring harm in all kinds of ways. They harm our creativity, they harm our economy, they harm our health. And they mean that we delude ourselves at the top of society as well as at the bottom.

Nigel Warburton : *And yet if you take the example of Renaissance Florence, it was great social inequality that allowed the wonderful artists that were commissioned by the Medici or whoever to flourish.*

Danny Dorling: No. No. No. No. No. It was the Medicis accepting the illegitimate son of a peasant woman and allowing him to sit not just at the end of the table but next to the Lord of the table. It was the equality of the Medici times that did that. They had an attitude which was unusual, was breaking against the old hierarchies of inequality, and it particularly fits Leonardo. You don't have the sons and daughters of millionaires and billionaires becoming great artists. Art and creativity are something that's in everybody. What happens to particularly draw it out of individuals at particular times varies. But if you look at things like where the highest proportion of scientific papers are written per person - that's Finland and Sweden. If you look at where the most patents per person are, accordingly - that's Japan. We have a myth in very unequal countries like the United States and the UK that we're particularly entrepreneurial.

Nigel Warburton: *So are you saying that there are no benefits from economic and equality?*

Danny Dorling: I find it hard to find them. There are dis-benefits from ridiculous levels of imposed equality. I think it's hard to find an example of a place in the rich world which has become too equal for things to work.

Nigel Warburton: *Obviously uniformity in economic holdings is not a sustainable position anyway because people would start to spend the money in the way they want to spend it, and there will be those who gamble and those who don't, those who want to save and those who want to spend. But is there anything we can do generally to reduce the massive levels of inequality of wealth that we now find ourselves with?*

Danny Dorling: Well the massive levels of inequality and wealth are currently reducing. We're speaking in a week in which we've had 5% drops in the German stock exchange in a day. What a 5% drop in the stock exchange means is a reduction in inequality and wealth. I'm not saying it's all good, but it's not necessarily as bad as people make out. The general economic crisis of the rich countries at the moment is a reduction in international inequalities in wealth. It's talked about, about the Brick countries coming up but if you want a slightly more equal world, part of what's going on is not necessarily bad. So in answer to your question 'Can you?', we are, it's actually happening. Whether it carries on and is sustainable, and whether you get to a point where the richest countries of the world are that little bit less rich but more equal, which is how you can tolerate being less rich, poorer countries are better off but don't have a super elite who becomes very rich. That's your kind of soft landing for humanity – it's that you get to a point where people have enough, but you have very few who have too little, and even fewer who have too much.

Nigel Warburton: *But you're talking about the vagaries of the market, and actually historically the way that people try to reduce economic inequality is through political change, I mean imposition of rules which prevent the rich from getting massively richer.*

Danny Dorling: Markets have always had rules. Markets are very, very old. We haven't lived without markets. We've made a mistake in the last four centuries of calling the new ways in which we live 'the market' as if there weren't markets before then. Equality makes traditional markets more equal, more efficient. The classic example is prisoners. prisoners of war: when you're given your Red Cross box, what happens is that prisoners swap things that they don't like, seeing that somebody doesn't like chocolate, somebody doesn't like something else. Markets are incredibly efficient when everybody's on the same level. Markets become really inefficient when you have a few people who have lots of money and many people who don't. So the people with lots of money might just buy some food because they feel like hoarding it, not because they need it. They might buy a nice looking

book not because they want to read the book, but just because they can, and to them it doesn't cost very much. So inequality makes market economies inefficient.

Nigel Warburton : *Now, you describe yourself as a human geographer, and that's a form of social science. There is one, perhaps naïve, view of a scientist that they go out and describe the way the world is. But it seems to me you're doing much more than that.*

Danny Dorling: I'm doing a little more than that. I tend to get criticized in human geography for being somebody who describes far more than almost anybody else describes because I draw maps and look at numbers and do pictures. But the way I grandly put it is imagine that you were a medic and you were interested in something like lung cancer in the early 1950s and you thought it was very complicated and there were all these possible that could be causing lung cancer and many theories. But you did a very simple descriptive study with doctors who were smoking and you found an incredible correlation that the more that doctors seemed to smoke, the more they got lung cancer. Now the group of social scientists who are interested in inequality in the last few years have suddenly started getting these graphs which suggest it's much more important than even they thought it was, and so you end up not just describing things, but saying something does appear to be going on here. It's hard to remain completely neutral in that situation, but helps to try to work out what situation you think you're in.

Nigel Warburton: *Well it's one thing to hypothesise about correlations and the likelihood of them being causal relations, and it seems to be another one to say 'Look this is something wrong and we ought to be changing it'. That almost seems a different enterprise: you're a moralist at that point.*

Danny Dorling: I think I'd be more a moralist if I was saying, you know, regardless of the outcome this is wrong. In terms of having to think carefully about my philosophical position on this, it isn't that hard because everything lines up so neatly. There isn't an affluent country in the world with high levels of inequality where other things work well. I would be a moralist I think, if I was just against inequality even if it had positive outcomes.

Nigel Warburton: *Well, if you were one of the elite who were very rich, there would be clear positive outcomes from large inequalities of wealth. I mean, you would be the person who gains at the expense of other people.*

Danny Dorling: I might gain money. I might be able to extend my lifespan with the help of a private doctor who was well behaved morally; but I might also fear being kidnapped; I might also begin to realize that people despise me; I might wonder what was the point of all this; I might begin to wonder whether my partner really liked me or was just with me for the money; I might start to distrust the servants; I might wonder if my children are

having an honest relationship with me, or in fact did they have to lie as well. And if you look at very rich people and you watch how some of them are giving away large amounts of their money, I think they're coming to similar conclusions.

Nigel Warburton: *Nevertheless there are values inherent in the way you've described things so far. It's not as if you're giving a neutral account of economic inequality. You're - particularly in that last answer - suggesting that we see things from the point of view of an equal humanity, not from the point of view of the super rich, some of whom may see things completely differently from the way you've described it.*

Danny Dorling: I've never seen the position where somebody has a neutral view. There will be biases and values that I hold that I'm somewhat aware of. There'll be other ones that I hold that I won't be aware of at all, and that's when it's really interesting when somebody points out to you what it is, and you suddenly realize you were holding these. I think when everybody is losing out from a situation... the classic example would be the children of the very rich being brought up by a nanny, so they're not actually getting to see their parents; the nanny's own children being brought up by the nanny's mother because the nanny can't look after them... and you can do this chain of sadness and one of my strongest kind of biases is I hate chained stupidity: somebody exploiting somebody else is bad, but even worse is when you've got everybody losing out.

Nigel Warburton: *When you're suggesting that greater equality would lead to better outcomes that's a kind of generalization based on some kind of past evidence. Is that like a scientific law?*

Danny Dorling: It's a scientific law when it comes to income and just money. All money is, is a means to exchange. It gives you permission to do something else. So if somebody has lots of it, other people don't have as much. So in terms of money I think you can make a claim of a scientific law. What the poor need above all else is a bit more money, and when people say the poor don't need money, they haven't got the idea of poverty. And you can't all be rich: I mean, that's a scientific law: you could only all be rich if aliens came from another planet and became our slaves.

When it comes to things like improvements in education... for instance I'd suggest that in cities in Britain which are a bit more equal, children there should do better. So the city I live in, Sheffield, sends more children to university than the city I used to live in, which is Bristol, which is a much more unequal city. Those are correlations, and then you can begin to try to work out what is the causal reason, you know, Is it chance? And the same with health. It's a correlation and then you look for the reasons, and the part of the thing with health is that a very



rich person might be able to extend their life a tiny amount by paying for huge amounts of drugs, but the same amount of money can have a huge affect on thousands of babies who don't die of malaria. But you have to prove it.

Nigel Warburton: *These kind of thoughts, they must be relevant to social policy and how government implements various programmes. Do you think social science generally has something important to offer to politics?*

Danny Dorling: Social science always has important things to offer the politics but often there are very long lags over it. What social science does is help to define the underlying ethos that is taught about how society operates and that eventually influences politicians some but it may be from what they have read when they were at school. I think social scientists worry too much about trying to have an immediate policy impact, and don't take as much comforts as they should about the very long term beneficial effects they can have if they're careful with what they do. And the greatest affect is theones you don't notice, when the underlying belief systems of society alter.

Nigel Warburton: *Daniel Dorling, thank you very much.*

Danny Dorling: Thank you.

[ends]