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# Kate Pickett on the Case for Equality

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**David Edmonds:** There are huge inequalities in the U.S between rich and poor. Some claim that this is one of the secrets to the dynamism of the U.S economy. There are tremendous rewards to be had from success, big homes, exotic holidays. Well, yes and no. Kate Pickett, of the University of York, is one half of the duo who wrote *The Spirit Level*. She says that in an unequal society, even the wealthy suffer.

**Nigel Warburton:** Kate Pickett, welcome to Social Science Bites.

**Kate Pickett:** Thank you, Nigel, glad to be here.

**Nigel Warburton:** The topic we're going to focus on is The Case for Equality. I wonder if you could begin by just saying what kind of equality you're interested in?

**Kate Pickett:** Our research focuses on social inequality, and by that I mean the vertical inequalities in society, how a society is structured hierarchically, and we use income inequality as a measure of that, so of course there are all kinds of different inequalities. Inequalities of ethnicity, inequalities of age or gender, and it's not those, it's the vertical inequality, the social inequality.

**Nigel Warburton:** Are you saying that equality of wealth is a measure of social hierarchy, or that it *is* the social hierarchy?

**Kate Pickett:** Well, both. Income inequality is sort of easy to measure these days, so it's a useful way we can compare different societies, but also because we use our income in very social ways, because income has a social meaning, it turns out to be a really good measure of the social distances between us.

**Nigel Warburton:** And we're talking about income, rather than absolute wealth?

**Kate Pickett:** Yes, I'm sure wealth disparities work in the same way that we've shown income inequalities to work, but it's income inequality that we can get good data on, to compare different societies.

**Nigel Warburton:** Could you say a little bit about what kind of data you have gathered?

**Kate Pickett:** Well, I haven't gathered any of it. What we do is use data that other people have collected, and so what we're always looking for are robust measures that are internationally recognised as being comparable, and being reliable, so our income inequality data come from the United Nations Human Development reports. We use data on health from the World Health Organisation, for example.

**Nigel Warburton:** And globally, you found really interesting patterns about what inequality of income correlates with?

**Kate Pickett:** It's not quite global. We focus on the rich, developed market democracies, and there's a reason for that. It's because in the early stages of economic growth, so if we're looking at developing or emerging economies, rising standards of living, absolute standards of living are really important, because the wellbeing of people in those societies really depends on them having sufficient food, shelter, warmth etc., so those societies need economic growth and for their living standards to go up. But in the rich developed countries, there's no longer any relationship between a country getting richer and richer, and its health improving, or its happiness improving, or its wellbeing improving. It's as if we've got to the end of what economic growth can do for us in improving our societies, and so over decades, you know, you see countries getting richer and richer, but no improvement in their relative health or wellbeing. So what becomes important in a society like ours is relative social position, and that actually has a more powerful effect on our health and wellbeing, than the fact that perhaps a very few of us may no longer have enough.

**Nigel Warburton:** Is that a psychological effect? Are you saying that because I feel superior in various ways, to people who earn less than me, I then flourish, or don't flourish? That seems odd?

**Kate Pickett:** Actually, I wouldn't call it just a psychological effect, more of a psycho-social effect. So it's all about, not just how you feel in relation to others, both those above you in the structure of society, and those below you, but also how those feelings affect your physiology, so we know that low social status has a profound effect on chronic stress, for instance, which then can have profound effects on our health, but it can also affect the way we behave, both towards those above and those below. So, there is an emotional, psychological component to how you feel about your relative social status, but there are also these deeply biological effects as well.

**Nigel Warburton:** These effects are apparent on the people of relatively low social status, are they apparent on the higher status individuals?

**Kate Pickett:** There aren't that many studies that allow us to really look at that, because what you need to be able to do is compare people at the same socio-economic position, across different societies, but from the studies we have, it's clear that the effect of inequality is most profound on the poorest, and those of the lowest social status, but it goes all the way up to the top. If you, with your level of education, or income, or your social class, were living in a more unequal society, you would be more likely to have health and social problems, and so would your children, than your counterpart living in a more equal place. What we're comparing are modern market democracies that all work, in different ways, they're all capitalist societies, but there are really striking differences in inequality between

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them, so if you look at countries like Japan, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, their income inequality with the measure we use, is about twice that of say, the U.K, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S.A, so we're not talking about a difference between perfect equality, and something horrendous. We don't have a society that has perfect equality, we don't know one that would do, but we can see that by comparing these societies, that those are a little bit more equal than us, or a fair bit more equal than us, or quite a lot more equal than us, do a lot better.

**Nigel Warburton:** So, are you really saying that if there's an incredibly wealthy individual, that person would be better off in terms of health and happiness, if he or she moved to Japan or to one of the countries that has less inequality than America, say?

**Kate Pickett:** Yes. Statistically, all of the data we have on income inequality never includes the super-rich. They're simply not there in surveys of income distribution. But what we're saying is that if you're in the top, say 20% of the income distribution, or the top 10% in some studies, or the top 5%, we can see that the benefits of greater equality extend up to you, so yes, if you were that wealthy individual, in a more equal society, your life expectancy would, on average, be longer. Your children would be less likely to drop out of school, or do drugs, or become pregnant. You would be less likely to be a victim of crime. For a rich individual, there are still problems that arise from living in a more unequal society, that their wealth or their income cannot isolate them from. So inequality is very destructive of the social fabric, the cohesion of the whole society. You get more problems of violence in a more unequal society, and we see a reaction to that among the rich, you know, of them tending to want to live in gated communities, which is a fearful position to be in actually, and if you live in a very unequal society where status matters so much more, then there's a constant striving to keep up with that that is a source of stress in itself. So, there are lots of ways in which, even for those who are achieving well, in a more unequal society, are still suffering from the problems that inequality imposes upon the whole society.

**Nigel Warburton:** Given that relative status is so important here, mightn't there be a different way of changing people's attitude to status that is connected with wealth and income, and find other markers of status, and thereby not get into all of the difficulty of redistribution?

**Kate Pickett:** I'm interested to know what you think those markers might be?

**Nigel Warburton:** Success, in other terms than economic success, I mean lots of people choose to be academics, not for the money, certainly, but for the prestige that goes with being a respected scientist or a respected expert on literature. Nothing to do with the income.

**Kate Pickett:** I think that's true, that a lot of people find their fulfilment through things other than income, but when we say 'a lot of people', it's quite clear that income, and what it means, is actually driving a lot of people's thoughts and perceptions and sense of wellbeing, so that those who choose to sort of 'opt out' of that rat race are rather unusual in society, and what a more equal society seems to give is more people an opportunity to flourish and find value in the kinds of work they do, so that we're not only seeing money as a marker of status.

**Nigel Warburton:** Now, you're working within the realm of social science on the basis of empirical data, but your conclusions are obviously potentially very interesting politically, because you're not just describing the world, you seem to be revealing implications that suggest we ought to change it.

**Kate Pickett:** That's true, and I think it's quite difficult as an academic social scientist to know where the boundaries of your discipline lie, and what your role should be in disseminating, or spreading information that you have. We have built up, and other people as well, of course, a huge body of evidence on the damaging consequences of inequality, which do have enormously political implications. Should one strive for growth, or should one strive for a fairer distribution of the proceeds of growth, and I'm a social epidemiologist, so I see my job as trying to describe and understand the social causes of poor health and wellbeing. I'm not a policy expert, so although my work has huge policy implications, I don't see it as my role to prescribe, necessarily, the policy solutions that would flow from that. However, the great thing I think we've also learned from our empirical research is that there are lots of different ways that a society can become more equal; so we have a society like Japan where the income distribution is quite narrow to start with, so there aren't huge pay ratios within Japan, whereas we have a country like Sweden which is about as equal as Japan, but it has quite large income differences to start with, and achieves its greater equality through taxation redistribution, so it clearly doesn't matter too much how you get that greater equality, it just matters that you achieve it. That means there is a menu of policy options for people to think about.

**Nigel Warburton:** It's really interesting because you have to tease out the cause and effect and distinguish it from merely correlated facts, but societies are so complex and so different, so Japan is, in many respects, nothing like a Scandinavian country - so comparing them must be incredibly difficult.

**Kate Pickett:** Well, no, actually that makes it easier, because if all the equal countries were all the same in some other way, all had exactly the same kind of welfare system, and all the unequal countries were different on that same factor, all had very contrasting welfare systems, then we might well not be able to distinguish between whether or not it was the welfare regime we saw, or income inequality itself. So that heterogeneity, that variance in

how countries achieve that equality is actually helpful to making the causal connection or the causal inference and of course we would never say that inequalities are the only cause of the health and social problems we looked at; so if we take something like teenage births or homicides, clearly lots of different factors affect the prevalence of that in different societies. What we are saying is that inequality looks to be a common root cause across these difference societies, of a whole range of problems.

**Nigel Warburton:** Was that a discovery that you expected?

**Kate Pickett:** Well, we'd been working on health inequalities for a long time, and there's now a huge literature on income inequality and health, and separately criminologists have been looking at income inequality as a cause of violent crime for a long time. Once we started thinking about the psycho-social pathways, which lead from inequality to poor health, it became clear that we ought to see other behavioural consequences, or social consequences of inequality, and once we started looking at those, then I think there was the surprise that the picture was so consistent that the differences between societies were so large, so ten to sixteen-fold differences in imprisonment rates between different societies, six-fold differences in teenage birth rates, three or four-fold difference in mental illness, so that was striking. The range of things that seemed to be affected was striking, but we started looking at those because of the strong picture that was already there for health.

**Nigel Warburton:** So, how do you guard against the confirmation bias, the idea that, perhaps if you go out into the world and look for a particular sort of correlation, you probably will find it because you eliminate the counter evidence as you're looking?

**Kate Pickett:** Obviously one tries not to do that, so we were systematic in the selection of the countries we decided to look at from, you know, a list of the richest countries and excluding tax havens. We chose to look at health and social problems that have a strong social gradient and we chose to look at those that had good quality data, and then we made the decision that if we had a data source like the WHO, that provided data for the countries we had chosen to look at, we would take all of those data, and not just drop pieces of it, and we did, of course, describe cases where we found what we were expecting, didn't happen. There is, for instance, no relationship between income inequality and higher suicide rates. In fact, it goes in the opposite direction, so more equal societies tend to have higher suicide rates, although they have much higher homicide rates, and we think that is to do also with sort of psycho-social effects on society of whether or not you tend to blame society at large for your problems, or yourself. There's no relationship between smoking and income inequality among adults, although recently someone has published a study showing that for young people there is. I think that is probably because all of the countries we look at are at very different points on the smoking epidemic. And the other surprising one was when we



first looked at children's aspirations, and it appeared that they were lower in more equal societies.

It took a while sort of thinking about that, and then I realised that the societies where people were expressing higher aspirations were actually the ones with the lower educational attainment, which is a very sad fact, and they didn't seem to match up at all, you know, those things move in opposite directions. And I think what that is telling us is that in a society where a lot of kids don't achieve their potential, drop out of school or don't achieve very well, those are the unequal societies where money and status have become very, very important, so their aspirations are there, even though their capability of achieving them is not. So we're always honest about finding relationships that don't fit the picture, and then trying to think about what explanations there might be for that. But we also did subject our inference to a couple of tests. We chose somebody else's index of wellbeing, the UNICEF index of child wellbeing, which we didn't make up and has 40 different components in it, strongly significantly related to inequality. And then we also decided to look at the 50 US states as a completely separate sort of test bed, and find that for all of the things we're looking at, the relationship with inequality is there in the states as well.

**Nigel Warburton:** I know that your work has been picked up by politicians in Britain particularly, on both sides of the house, as it were. How do you feel about that?

**Kate Pickett:** I feel it's an excellent first step. I think the first step in changing whether or not we are a more or less equal society is for there to be a political debate about whether or not that is desirable, what the evidence tells us, and discussion about the policies we need to get there. I think the evidence is so convincing, that whether you're on the political right, or the left, you ought to be thinking about solutions that make society more equal that are acceptable to your political ideology. And I think we have seen a real shift in the public debate around inequality, and that in time, hopefully we will see the policy shifts that help to achieve that, but it's not just been in the UK that our work has been of interest. It's been debated in parliaments in New Zealand, in Canada, in other places as well, and we're working currently with an international group that will be producing a report for the United Nations in 2014 on a new development paradigm for the world, which is about creating development that maximises wellbeing and is sustainable. And what that means is that you've got to work with people from lots of different disciplines, not only are social epidemiologists showing the appalling consequences of inequality for health and wellbeing. Economists are now starting to look very closely at inequality as a cause of economic instability, so that's helpful and important as well, because it adds a range of different evidence that helps make the case for greater equality.

**Nigel Warburton:** You've had critics as well as supporters, and some of them have been quite vocal. Have any of them come up with serious evidence that made you think again?

**Kate Pickett:** No, I think that most of the criticisms were ill-informed and shallow, and that actually the body of evidence that exists is really solid and of course, even since we published our book, research on inequality has continued, has expanded, and there's a flood of new research that is constantly coming across our desks showing that inequality is related to things we hadn't thought of, or confirming some of our hunches. So no, I don't feel that there has been any serious criticism that we can't answer or address, or that makes us feel shaky about the evidence that is there.

**Nigel Warburton:** Kate Pickett, thank you very much.

**Kate Pickett:** Thank you very much, I've enjoyed it.

[ends]