

Shrink Rap Radio #717 - The Psychological Effects of Social inequality

Isabella Clarke interviews UK epidemiologist Professor Richard Wilkinson

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by E.E. Nobbs)

The interview

Isabella Clarke:

Richard Wilkinson studied economic history and the philosophy of science at the London School of Economics before training in epidemiology. From the 1970s onwards, his research focused on social class differences in death rates. He's played a formative role in international research on the social determinants of health and on the societal effects of income inequality. Richard is emeritus professor of social epidemiology at the University of Nottingham Medical School, honorary professor at UCL, a visiting professor at the University of York, and co founder of The Equality Trust; he wrote *The Spirit Level*, and more recently, *The Inner Level* with Kate Pickett, both books generating considerable interest. Richard, welcome to Shrink Wrap Radio.

Richard Wilkinson:

Thank you. Nice to be with you.

Clarke:

And, first of all, Richard, you are an epidemiologist by training, which makes me think you must have a personal as well as professional interest in the course of this pandemic. But perhaps you could start by telling us about your background and how you came to focus particularly on inequality rather than virology, for example.

Wilkinson:

I was one of the first people trained in epidemiology who had not done medicine first, to have a background in the social sciences rather than medicine. That means one asks rather different questions. My first degree was economic history. And in economic history, you take changes in death rates as indicative of changes in living standards. And so the relationships between social class and health deprivation and health were almost assumed background, but almost unrecognized by the medical profession at that time.

Clarke:

And so it became the focus of the research in your research generally.

Wilkinson:

Yes. I had, I suppose, intuitions that inequality was important, perhaps because it's an important issue amongst Quakers and I was sent to a Quaker school, for instance. And I lost my religious belief a very long time ago. But I think many of the values are still close to me.

Clarke:

We'll be talking mainly about *The Inner Level*, which was published in 2019. But I thought it would be incredibly useful for listeners to give a brief recap of what you said in *The Spirit Level*, published 10 years earlier. And essentially, to give a sense of what the societal impacts of the dramatic levels of inequality are that we see in the UK and in the USA, particularly.

Wilkinson:

Many people know about the huge health inequalities. But what they don't recognize is that inequalities in endless other social problems are part of the same picture. And if you look at the educational performance of schoolchildren, it's good at the top of society, poorer at the bottom. If you look at measures of child wellbeing or violence, you see the same pattern, all those, almost all those problems that have what we call social gradients, more common at the bottom of society, get worse with bigger income differences. The relationship is really extraordinarily simple. I mean, basically, all we're saying is that the problems which have those social gradients related to social status within our societies get worse when you increase the status differences. And that's basically what income inequality does.

Clarke:

You made a profoundly interesting point as well, I thought, that those differences stretch further up the gradient, the more unequal society is.

Wilkinson:

Yes, that's one of the surprises, I suppose one of the biggest surprises, and I puzzled over it for rather a long time. Although inequality makes the biggest differences at the bottom of society, even at the top there are small benefits of living in a more equal society. And by that, I mean, if we took you with your income, education, occupation, if you lived in a more equal society than Britain, you might live a little bit longer, your children might do a bit better school, you'd be less likely to become a victim of violence. And those sorts of ways you'd do better in a more equal society, even though as far as I know, you're not poor or destitute.

Clarke:

And that does make it a very salient fact for anyone, whatever position in society they're in, to feel that there isn't just a moral obligation, but a pragmatic obligation to work towards greater equality in society.

Wilkinson:

Yes, I think that's true. I was going to say, and I think, in the later book, *The Inner Level*, really, we take that a bit further and show how intimately almost all of us are affected by inequality, because inequality has psychological effects.

Clarke:

And that's particularly what I did want to focus on today. But before we go into it, I wanted to add that you're incredibly careful about all the research that you've done, or that you quote, indeed, it seemed to me that you showed absolutely the highest possible standard in collating and analyzing data. Both books,

well, particularly *The Inner Level*, which I've read recently, it's incredibly rigorous. And I wanted to offer you the opportunity to explain why you felt it was so important, not just to put in the rigor in analyzing the data, but to make it so clear to readers that you were firmly behind it and firmly could back it up.

Wilkinson:

I think it's really nervousness. I think I'm afraid of being caught out by colleagues, if you like. I mean, if you develop a slightly new line and interpretation and thinking about the data, you feel pretty vulnerable. And I think my care is simply defense. I don't want to be vulnerable. And yet, for various psychological reasons, I've always felt vulnerable.

Clarke:

Well, it certainly came across to me that that level of responsibility, not just added weight to the argument that you were making, but also it has an effect of making the points more salient. You know, you can't dismiss them as a reader. Really.

Wilkinson:

It's probably also that I work extraordinarily slowly. So every word is thought about and changed repeatedly.

Clarke:

It's very, very readable. I mean, for a book that's got so much data in it, and so many complex arguments, it is a very easy to read book. I would recommend it to people.

Wilkinson:

And that's one of the advantages of working two people together on it. Kate Pickett and I working together, you know, one of us would write the first draft to one chapter and the other of another chapter and we'd swap and we'd swap, and we'd swap all the time making it slightly more readable. And you know, it's easier to point out awkward sentences of somebody else's.

Clarke:

Yes, when they're not your baby. I can understand that and also to have that close working relationship where you can do that without offending each other.

Wilkinson:

Yes, it was possible with Kate because I knew she'd be kind to me.

Wilkinson

And it is in *The Inner Level*, which has the site subtitle, "How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity, and improve everyone's well being", and so for listeners of Shrink Wrap Radio, that's why we're talking particularly about something which might seem to be a societal level problem of inequality because it does appear so strongly connected to issues that therapists and psychoanalysts might be dealing with day to day in their offices. So in that book, it seems that you're stating the causal role played by inequality in worsening rates of psychological well being. it's not just a, I mean, that is the hypothesis that

you're very strongly arguing in that book, that there is a causal factor in steep rates of inequality, relating to worsening psychological health.

Wilkinson:

So I think it's bizarre that there's so little attention to the structural factors influencing mental health, that it's treated as if it's always entirely personal, as if mental health was always determined at the very private, individual personal level. And in a way, we were wanting to show that income inequality matters to us in quite intimate terms. And the main thing is that, in a society where you have bigger income differences between rich and poor, it increases all those feelings of superiority and appearance of superiority at the top, and inferior are at the bottom. And that by increasing the idea, that strengthening the idea that some people are worth so much more than others, it makes us more worried about how we are seen and judged. There are insecurities that we all have about our own self worth, I think is exacerbated by inequality.

Clarke:

Two aspects of your analysis really helped me to understand the detrimental impact of inequality. And I think that listeners might find it very helpful to look at them. Perhaps you could explain how our egalitarian past and in a converse way, their dominance behavior system make humans especially susceptible to status anxiety. And perhaps first of all, the egalitarian past, which is another area. Funnily enough, I just read Christopher Baum's book before I read *The Inner Level*.

Wilkinson:

Which one moral? The *Moral Origins*?

Clarke:

Yeah, I just read that, which is very dense. it's, it was, yes, profoundly interesting. And so when I found that you had referenced him, I felt as if I was on the right path to understanding, but maybe you could sort of bring us all up to that level in terms of understanding, how that egalitarian past impacts, makes us more vulnerable to status anxiety.

Wilkinson:

I think it's odd that people always imagine that inequality and some sort of dominant competitive framework has always been central to all human societies. But there is quite general agreement amongst anthropologists, anthropologists who studied hunting and gathering societies, that they were nearly always extraordinarily egalitarian. I mean, if you think of small hunting and gathering bands, they were nothing like the small groups of animals, packs of monkeys, and so on, where the dominants eat first, and the subordinates only get anything if there's enough left and where the dominant males are trying to monopolize access to the females. Those weren't at all the patterns that happen amongst human beings. In fact, anthropologists sometimes say that hunting and gathering societies which cover 90 or 95% of our existence were anatomically modern with brains the current size; they say we were assertively egalitarian, and that we were rather watchful over being treated as equals, and defending our own autonomy and so on. And so, basically, we argue that we have instincts that come from pre human existence in thinking about monkey ranking systems on natural ranking, but we also have a quite different inheritance, overlaid on that earlier one to do with egalitarianism, and inherited characteristics selected by those two different

social environments, so if you're in a society where all the goods go to the people at the top, the animals at the top, then it'll select the characteristics which get or win those characteristics. But if you're in a hunting and gathering society that's so egalitarian, you'll get ostracized if you start behaving like that. And the people who get selected as sexual partners or hunting and gathering people to cooperate with, will be the ones who are less self interested, or able to be cooperative and helpful to each other. And so, we have two very contrasting sets of characteristics to do with the quality of social relations. We use them all all the time, and we know how to treat our friends, we don't put them down when we have people in for a meal. We don't. And if we do start behaving as if we thought things were superior, then our friends are quite likely to say, 'Who the hell do you think you are?' You know it. That angers people. But of course in the public sphere, we can be extraordinarily snobbish, we can name drop, we're always trying to give an impression that we're better than we are, and so on. And so we played two different games. But if you like, the balance between those two different social strategies, how much we use one and how much we use the other, is influenced by the amount of inequality in society. In some worlds, you'd have to do everything just considering yourself, you'd have to be completely out for yourself. In other societies, you depend entirely on cooperation on being apparently altruistic, on empathy and trust, and so on.

Clarke:

Oh that makes, that's beautifully expressed, because it does sort of frame the idea of how a more equal society leads to that sense of cooperation, enhancing those values of empathy, whereas a society where there are these steep gradients and I think you used, I don't know if you quoted Robert Sapolsky, his work in the book, but you were using the the idea of the the field research on baboons, for example, where those who were, and you were particularly talking about the those in the middle, you have to be very, very aware of who is above you, and do the kowtowing to them. And those below you, you can take out your frustration on any baboon, who's lower in the baboon's pecking order. And you can see how that would manifest in a society or those kinds of tendencies would be more likely to manifest where you have the hierarchy stretching upwards rather than going across.

Wilkinson:

And basically, these issues are so important that evolutionary psychologists say that our brains are wired, or still have some of the same wiring that monkeys in a dominance hierarchy have what they call a dominance behavioral system, for dealing with those issues of who is superior to you and who is inferior, and how differently you behave to each that when you meet somebody, apparently we size up relative social status in relation to each other within seconds.

Clarke:

Wow.

Wilkinson:

And you know, these things and they have strong physiological effects and the famous Whitehall studies of civil servants, now, that have been run for many years by Michael Marmot. They found very early on that subordinate, low, lower status, civil servants have higher levels of fibrinogen, a blood clotting factor, and that is responsive to fear. And it's important because if you're a low status animal and you're quite likely to get attacked, and you know, low status animals have many more bite marks apparently, than

dominant ones, you want your blood to clot quickly. And then to find it in civil servants in London, that blood clots faster, as if they were afraid of being bitten by a suitcase. To do this, but and why it's a disadvantage, because it's also a risk factor for heart disease.

Clarke:

in the book, you suggest that increased rates of both depression and anxiety and on that kind of spectrum of mental health concerns, but also narcissism can be seen through this lens. Could you please talk a little bit about that?

Wilkinson:

Yes. I mean, in a society where there's such big differences in how people are valued, whether they're regarded as infinitely important, almost worthless. As they say, we're judging each other more by status as if self worth was indicated by external wealth. And that means that we are all more worried about how we are seen and judged. And there are two responses to that. If you feel everyone's sort of looking at you, as if you're, you know, not worth much or you feel insecure, then you may be overcome with feelings of lack of confidence, low self esteem, and so on. You start finding social interaction too stressful, and you avoid going to parties or going out in the evening, you find you're more relaxed if you're at home alone. And so one response to this, what psychologists call an increased social evaluative threat, your worries about status, anxiety is another name is that if you like, go under with becoming depressed, anxious, and so on, but the other response, quite the opposite. But coming out to the same insecurities is to beat yourself up. You know, I try, and conversation too. Well, I didn't get a good degree. But if I did, I might say, I might find ways of bringing in going to a good university, getting good results or being promoted young or something like that. And none of that actually applies.

Clarke:

Well, you've had a pretty illustrious career, I'd say. Anyway, the point is you flaunt your abilities and achievements, exaggerate them, find ways of bringing them into the conversation. But you also, of course, use consumerism, how you build yourself up in other people's eyes, is partly by having a flashy car and smart clothes and the latest kind of phone and all that kind of thing. And there are now studies, both international studies and in the 50 states of the US showing that if you live in a more unequal area, you spend more of your money on this sort of status consumption to build yourself up. So two opposite responses to that social evaluative threat, your worries about how you're seen and judged.

Wilkinson:

And one, as you said, related to narcissism and so on. The other is more related to things like depression.

Clarke:

With respect to the narcissism side, I think Scott Barry Kaufman has done some research suggesting two different forms of narcissism. I can't remember how he terms them, but one does seem to be, I don't know if he calls it fragile narcissism, but it does seem to be entirely what you're describing there. And I think in the book, you suggested that in that, in that sort of way of being, there is also a great sense of protection towards one's respect, and that one can feel very, very sort of, like threatened by even neutral behavior as if it's being dismissive or disrespectful.

Wilkinson:

Yes. I think that's very true. And I think if you're particularly sensitive to these things, and of course, individual sensitivity varies. Some people are pretty thick skinned, and others who imagine all these problems even worse than perhaps they are.

Clarke:

Some people are more thick skinned and others more thin skinned, and you can feel very vulnerable to slights or suggestions of not being not garnering adequate respect from others.

Wilkinson:

Yes, but I can't remember what I was going to add to that.

Clarke:

Sorry, I probably boxed you into a bit of a corner. I was wondering because it might be useful for those who are therapists and counselors in training just to give a sense of the sort of percentage differences in equal and more unequal societies in terms of rates of conditions such as depression or anxiety, because you go through a lot of that in the book.

Wilkinson:

Well, we have graphs showing that in more unequal societies there is more clinical depression, there's more schizophrenia. And a graph showing in the United States narcissism rising with inequality. I haven't actually thought of it in terms of percentage differences. I mean, it's more that general trends than scores on the narcissistic personality and personality inventory. And I think the measures of schizophrenia that were put together by other people, a number of different studies, probably use like two different measures. But the best thing is simply to look at the graphs we reproduce in *The Inner Level*. But they do look like quite big differences. And there are, as I say, quite a number of different studies. So several of depression in relation to inequality comparing different countries, for instance.

Clarke:

And I was also wondering whether this level of stress and vulnerability can also increase existing tensions between groups and societies. I think I mentioned to you and in our email correspondence that Martha Nussbaum, in her book, *The Monarchy of Fear*, sees this, the tension now is related to an increase in misogyny. While the rise of various different sorts of factions, perhaps populist groups, populist parties and some other European countries also suggest greater distrust and antipathy between groups. Do you think that these kinds of group level antipathies could also be related or to the fact that people feel more stressed in unequal societies?

Wilkinson:

I think they're all part of the same thing. I mean, when any characteristic becomes a marker of low status, social status or vulnerability, it attracts the same kind of stigma. On top of that, I think that people who have had their sense of self worth reduced and have low self esteem, feel they are regarded as inferior, they try and regain some self esteem by putting down others below them. So you say at least I'm better

than those bastards. That kind of reaction. And actually, it has a name. It's called the bicycling reaction. Because if you imagine a drop handlebar bicycle, you're like bowing to your superiors, while kicking down inferiors. It was first used in work on Nazi Germany and describing what was going on in the social structure there. It was then taken up by people describing animal behavior. Apparently monkeys, when they've lost a battle for status, immediately take it out of inferiors, as if to stop a catastrophic loss of social status. And so, violence tends to go downwards. And in societies where there is more overall income inequality, bigger, vast differences, if you like, and income inequality, women's economic disadvantage is greater. They're also less likely to be involved in politics and to have not been and also less likely to have an equal share of directorships or anything like that. A discrimination against women increases with other inequalities. And I suspect the same is true in terms of race, and so on. And if skin color or linguistic group or religious affiliation become markers of low social status, then they attract the same sort of stigmatization. I think basically, with more inequality, you have more of what I call downward prejudices. But I disagree with the little I know of Martha Nussbaum's views, but because I think the class differences in incomes are so much bigger than gender differences. And I think women have nearly eight and nearly 20% a disadvantage. But the overall class differences are hugely much bigger. And I think we have to, and it's not, it shouldn't be an argument about who is at the bottom. If I'm at the bottom of the heap, I am not comforted to feel that everyone's got an equal chance of being at the bottom. No, I'm not less subject to prejudice and discrimination. I, what we have to do, is to reduce those inequalities that make those status differences.

Clarke:

So important. One of the other areas that seem to be so worrying to me, although the fragmentation of society seems fairly frightening, but the harmful effects on children of unequal societies, not just on the children, sort of like psychological health, but potentially, and that chapter on the cognitive impact the educational impacts of having an incredibly tough upbringing, it was absolutely shocking to me. And I think that probably that surely must be revolutionary to a lot of people. I think so many people still assume that there is a meritocracy, and that you are starting out from an equal playing field, and that if you put in the hard work and the willpower, and that just sort of tore apart that aspect of that argument.

Wilkinson:

Yes. I think it's interesting that as the whole subject of epigenetics develops, the ways in which the environment influences gene expression, switches genes on and off; it doesn't change your genetic makeup, but it changes a bit what genes do. And it's not just the physical environment that affects gene expression. It's the subjective social environment too and I think we shouldn't just think of a difficult early childhood as damaging you. It's preparing. And it seems to me we're wired in a way that suggests that we're using our early environment to know how we should best develop; what kind of world am I in? In a world where I have to fight for what I can get, learn not to trust others because we'll be rivals? Or am I in a world where the opposite is true? If dependent, as I said before, on cooperation, on empathy, on trust, they need completely different emotional and cognitive development. And I think there's a lot going on in early childhood to do with the trajectory in which you develop. And in a different world that kids we perhaps regard as damaged, or maybe they're more streetwise and in a different world absolutely do better.

Clarke:

You also pointed to some research on different different levels of gray matter, as opposed to white matter in brains, and also to the sort of educational potentials going up through the years after, if someone had started their life in positions of extreme stress and deprivation.

Wilkinson:

Yes, it looks as if stress, the stress of poverty actually affects even fairly crude measures of brain mass and development, mental white matter and so on. i'm not an expert in those things. But that's what studies seem to show.

Clarke:

That was very frightening. But it was also frightening to hear about the levels of status anxiety amongst children, their levels of, whether it was related to eating disorders, or all levels of well being, and that does seem to track levels of inequality in society as well, and children across the social gradient.

Wilkinson:

Yes, we use quite powerful measures of child well being designed to measure child well being in rich countries. And we've done actually a couple of papers in one, in the British Medical Journal, and then Pediatrics showing that most of the components of those measures of child well being as well as the overall measure, are substantially worse in more unequal countries, quite a strong relationship with the amount of inequality that we all have to contend with.

Clarke:

I'm wondering, thinking about people who are dealing with clients, with patients who come to them with various issues, how important do you think or how relevant is it for there to be an awareness of systemic and social factors? Obviously, I can't imagine that someone will want to say, well, you're just feeling like this because we're in an unequal society. But do you think there is a benefit to practitioners in understanding some of this sort of systemic framework surrounding the sort of mental pain that they're dealing with?

Wilkinson:

Yes, I do. After a couple of talks, we've given, people in the audience, at the end have said something like, I don't blame myself as much as I did, as if self blame for the depression and difficulties may have made the problems an even greater burden. I do think that and it's our self doubt, our insecurities, our feelings of doubts about our self worth, we hide away from each other. I try and appear at ease socially with other people. It's not true. But, you know, we all treat those self doubts as if it's a little sort of private psychological weakness we have which we mustn't allow other people to see. And I do think that life would be better if we recognized that we nearly all share this problem. That we all have those vulnerabilities. And perhaps we'd start helping each other with it and regard it as part of our common humanity as something that structural changes can reduce and you know I've just been quoting actually something that's from George Bernard Shaw where he talks about income inequality taking the broad fertile plane of human social ability and tipping it on its edge so that everyone has to cling to their, desperately to their foothold in society. I do think that's a powerful picture of what inequality does

and that broad fertile plane of human sociality, yeah it's a better place.

Clarke:

Yes that is a wonderful image and it struck me as you were talking about your own sense of vulnerability And I feel the same and as one of my friends when I mentioned this to him saying oh I'm so anxious. He says everyone feels like that but it's hard to believe it when you don't see evidence of it and I, in a situation where we are on that vertical situation rather than the flat one, and people feel too afraid to admit any more vulnerability than there is inherent already in a system where you're all striving, one against one and that the capacities that we then have those genuine connections with people when we're always sort of hiding something when we can't admit our own need and dependency and therefore that must change the way that we respond to other people's needs and dependencies too, affecting levels of empathy and the willingness to to be compassionate to others because maybe it would be too frightening to admit their need, because it might show us that actually we're the same.

Wilkinson:

Yes I think in this context the fact that therapeutic communities often used equality as part of the therapeutic environment, i think that's really important. I know it shows us how much these issues matter in terms of mental health.

Clarke:

And we should, as you were saying before we started the conversation and I mentioned how the death rates in deprived communities had been so excessively much larger than within other communities and you said how disappointing it was that that had been a shock when it should have been something that people understood would be the case and it seems like we keep on being shocked afresh by this kind of information. I was listening to David Runzman's Talking Politics podcast and he quoted at the end I wanted to write it down but I didn't quite have time and I expect you'd know it. The final line of Jean Rousseau's second declaration, the one about injustice, and he says something like it's essentially, to completely trash his beautiful words, it's unambiguously crazy to suggest that having a small amount ruling the mass, ruling the majority and putting them through deprivation and injustice is a good way to run a world and that's his final line, and to have something that's been there as a text in the European western tradition for hundreds of years and to still find it a surprise, that levels of inequality aren't great for us, it seems astonishing really.

Wilkinson:

Yes I think that we're becoming more if you like shockable about these inequalities well become, that means we're becoming more sensitive to them and I think if you go back generations people were just glad that they weren't amongst the born deprived. They felt fortunate that they didn't have to live in those conditions, but I think there's now increasingly a feeling that we shouldn't tolerate it in our society as a whole. I think we are becoming more sensitive and I think that well I think there are all sorts of other reasons for that and we're becoming more interdependent on a world scale. We depend on each other's production. We are at work whatever it is, I mean this interview isn't for your benefit or my benefit, it's for the people to watch and what anyone does is for other people and I think that sort of interdependence at that material level may well have emotional connotations, implications if you like, that

we, our moral community expands and we used to, centuries ago, you thought only about your your own family, your loyalty was entirely true in family and then maybe loyalty to your town or your whole country but now we are slowly becoming world citizens and moral values mean more than they used to in terms of people, sometimes the other side of the world . We have so many charities trying to sort out problems or diminish them, we have international aid from governments and so on. I think there are signs of growing concern at these problems, sensitivity to them.

Clarke:

That's an optimistic picture and I hope you're right. I won't say optimistic because that always sounds as if one's being pejorative. A hopeful picture I believe in. Hope is something that you can't guarantee its outcome, it's always contingent, but you believe that it's possible and are willing to strive towards it and recently I think you wrote an article in the Guardian where you stated some of this in the hope that there could be less inequality as a result perhaps of the coronavirus pandemic.

Wilkinson:

Yes I think even more so in relation to having to deal with the climate crisis and I mentioned earlier that there are studies showing that with more inequality there is more consumerism, and consumerism is one of the big obstacles to moving towards sustainability. We all want more money and will oppose any attempts to reduce carbon emissions and so on if they cost us anything. We will oppose green taxes and I think it's interesting that the movement in France was initiated by people feeling that the proposed fuel tax was unfair and the movement started before the tax had been imposed and in relation to that I think what Britain's wartime experience apparently, and this comes from Richard Titmuss who wrote the the volume of the history of the second world war dealing with social policy, said that in order to make people feel the burden of war was equally shared and to participate in the war effort they needed to reduce the social hierarchy.vThat's why they instituted rationing, why even the royal family wore austerity clothing and so on, why income differences were reduced, taxes on luxuries and subsidies on necessities. And if we're going to get people to be willing participants in the transition to sustainability, we have to have that feeling that it's equally shared and that we're all part of this; we've all got to make these changes and we're not being used and exploited while others get off scot-free and benefit from other people's efforts and so on.

Clarke:

That reminds me of Daniel Markowitz's suggestion for a one-off wealth tax to support those who've lost jobs or suffered in other ways during, a result of a pandemic and part of his argument for that was exactly that bridge building. I mean he has I guess his feelings are much the same as you. His book *The Meritocracy Trap* is like yours, is suggesting that meritocracy is not what we live in these days and and he wanted I think a lot of the reasons that he wanted, that was so that those in other areas of society apart from the very rich, could sense that that belief that we are all in it together; it's not a case of us and them like the royal family wearing austerity clothes, the super rich helping to support nations, people who who are facing real hardship.

Wilkinson:

Yes I agree entirely but it's much easier when there is something like a war emergency, so we all have to do something and it was possible with the pandemic and the policies that came out to assist the whole lockdown process. We need to go through that same sense of recognition that climate change is an emergency, that we all have to take part in that process of change.

Clarke:

Just one final thing before I let you go and thank you so much for your time today. Do you feel that as we, in our own personal attempts to support our own psychological health mental well-being, do you feel that can play any beneficial part, or do you think that the only way that that sort of scenario is going to get any better, is for there to be this systemic change in the first place? Is it a chicken and egg or is there no chicken and someone's got to create that egg?

Wilkinson:

No, I think just as with medical treatment for physical illness, although it's the nature of our lives that creates heart disease or weakens our immune systems or clogs up our lungs with air pollution, that doesn't mean that when we get ill we don't need care and support and treatment, and I think just the same is true of mental health. I think at least some treatments of physical illnesses are much more effective than anything we yet have for mental illness and so I think it's particularly important with mental illness to deal with the structural factors. I think it would be comparatively easy to make big differences to mental health by reducing inequality and just, mental illnesses as measured by WHO seem to be two or three times higher in a country like Britain or the United States than in the more equal countries, and therapy, counselling and so on is never going to make such a huge impact and we need it but we also need to deal with the structural causes of ill health. I often think it's the same as other areas of social policy, the level of drug addiction or criminality or school, failing children having trouble at school. Educational difficulties are never determined by the scale of services. Basically the society we live in creates the problems and we desperately try and provide services to deal with them but they're not in, they don't make a very major impact on the scale of these problems and while we deal with them through medicine or educational processes or counselling, all those problems have been constantly recreated in other people. In physical health we see this in terms of some of the big studies trying to reduce heart disease which counselled people, often frequently at home visits trying to get them to eat healthily, give up smoking, exercise and so on. The results were miserable. Very few people were changed and they said of course whenever we did change, get someone to stop smoking, we knew some child was starting to smoke in the same town and we know other people are going on with their unhealthy diets; you have to change the structural things that are endlessly generating these problems.

Clarke:

Well let's hope that somehow some force of politicians or a new political party can come to society's aid and regenerate things. I know that in the end of the book you have particular recommendations and suggestions as far as how corporations and businesses could help to alleviate the impact within those terms but as far as a society is concerned it's demanding quite major change I would think.

Wilkinson:

Yes and we think that the best way of reducing income inequalities is not only to deal with tax avoidance and tax havens and to make income tax more progressive again, but to embed democracy in the economic sphere -- to have employee representatives on company boards, to have more incentives to employee-owned companies and co-operatives and so on. Those kinds of more democratic models apparently work better in terms of productivity, are nicer organizations to work for and they have small income differences. So that would be the focus of our efforts, to our policies to reduce inequality.

Clarke:

Well I have to wish you all the best with your work and thank you so much for a book that really opened my eyes and changed the perspective with which I viewed a lot of aspects of the world and opened me to a lot more areas of concern that I had to be aware of, and I thank you for that because I feel like I'm a marginally better person through having read it, so thank you so much Richard for being on Shrink Wrap Radio.

Wilkinson:

Well, I'm very grateful for the opportunity you've given me to make this stuff better known, so thank you for your help.