



Supporting parents in an unequal society

Ethics and evidence



Traveller, there is no path, paths are made by walking
'But surely we now know enough to put an occasional
signpost in the sand?' (Richard Stott, 2010).

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- The evidence on inequality
 - Interrogating the beliefs that allow it to persist
 - Thinking about the consequences for mothers and fathers
 - A critical and contextual look at parenting support
 - Pulling the rabbit out of the hat? Ethics

The Spirit Level


- The work of epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) has illuminated the impact of this rise in inequality bringing an array of evidence in their book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Always do Better*, to reach important conclusions.
- Collected internationally comparable data on health and a range of social problems: levels of trust, mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction), life expectancy and infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance; teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and social mobility.
- Their findings suggest that there is a **very strong** link between ill health, social problems and inequality.
- Differences in average income between whole populations or countries do not seem to matter, but differences **within** those populations or countries matter very much. The amount of income inequality in a country is crucial.


Child mortality rates

0-4 years, per 1,000 births

UK	4.9
Ireland	4.6
Switzerland	4.3
Belgium	4.2
Netherlands	4.1
Austria	4.1
Greece	4.0
Denmark	3.8
Italy	3.7
France	3.7
Spain	3.6
Germany	3.6
Portugal	3.5
Finland	3.0
Norway	3.0
Luxembourg	2.8
Sweden	2.7
Iceland	2.4

SOURCE: THE LANCET

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- Wolfe et al note that poverty and deprivation in the UK, together with cuts in welfare, were directly linked to the deaths of the youngest children. Babies who die under age of one tend to be from deprived households, have a low birth weight and have parents who smoked. Between ages of one and five, deaths are mostly linked to injuries, accidents and serious diseases such as cancer.

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- Children between ages of one and four die of injuries and accidents more often in poorer than richer communities, where road traffic may be heavier and there are fewer safe places to play.

The recession and inequality

- Clarke, T with Heath, A (2014) *Hard Times: The divisive toll of the economic slump*, Yale University Prs
- Inequality has wrought a fragile society – poor communities cut adrift for 35 years
- A great deal of division, anxiety and fear
- The impact on kindness and social support
- Since 2010 welfare ‘reforms’ have intensified division, anxiety and fear

So why do we not do something?

Constructing stories about why things are as they are and, indeed, should be

1. The survival of the fittest, market efficiency, not being held back by the weakest, the feckless or undeserving
2. It's a just world

- The **just-world hypothesis** or **just-world fallacy** is the cognitive bias (or assumption) that a person's actions always bring morally fair and fitting consequences to that person, so that all noble actions are eventually rewarded and all evil actions are eventually punished. In other words, the just-world hypothesis is the tendency to attribute consequences to—or expect consequences as the result of—a universal force that restores moral balance. The fallacy is that this implies (often unintentionally) the existence of cosmic justice, destiny, divine providence, desert, stability, or order, and may also serve to rationalize people's misfortune on the grounds that they deserve it

Dorling (2011)

- Beliefs that sustain inequality and injustice
- Elitism is efficient
- Exclusion is necessary
- Prejudice is natural
- Greed is good
- Despair is inevitable

Shame in an unequal society

- Inequality *within* a society quite literally ‘gets under the skin’ of individuals leaving them feeling unvalued and inferior. The sociologist Thomas Scheff (1988) who argued that shame is the key social emotion. ‘Shame and its opposite, pride, are rooted in the processes through which we internalize how we imagine others see us’ (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, 41).
- Greater inequality heightens our anxieties because it increases the importance of social status. We come to see social position as a key feature of a person’s identity in an unequal society. Implications for all of us

Social suffering

- Bourdieu's (1999) concept of social suffering drew attention to social misery, not just the unequal distribution of material goods but also people's lived experiences of domination and the accompanying feelings such as humiliation, anger, despair and resentment.
- Others have noted the implications of living in societies where there is, on the one hand, a growth in inequality with a corresponding silting up of social mobility and, on the other hand, a dominant belief that anyone can make it, and if you don't you are a loser (Frost and Hoggett, 2008).

Double suffering

- The tragedy is that none of us automatically responds to hardship, humiliation or the abusive exercise of power through noble resistance, we are just as likely to turn our sense of grievance upon ourselves or innocent others. This is suffering turned upon itself and it is this double suffering which is often the subject of professional practice in welfare work (Frost and Hoggett, 2008: 455).
- Addictions, self harm, violence to self and others

Social abjection and resistance

- Imogen Tyler (2013)
- To be made abject is to be tortured by words, images, policies and mechanisms which continuously produce you as less than human
- Tyler does point to examples of revolt
- Also everyday examples captured in the work of ATD Fourth World
- Linda Tirado (2014) *Hand to Mouth: The truth about being poor in a wealthy world*, Virago

And so to parents...

- Evidence of increased emotional investment in children generally
- Mothers and fathers seeing children as a source of emotional connection and permanence in a world where other sources of meaning have disappeared
- The rise of ‘intimate fatherhood’
- Childhood as a protected space

Social Policy and children

- The child focused orientation
- Child has an independent relationship with the state
- Influenced by concerns with social investment and individualisation (children's rights)
- Child has rights, parents have responsibilities
- Parents are invisible as people but parenting is all important?
- Toxic implications for those in poverty

Poverty

- Why do we talk about ‘child poverty’?
- Poor children are sentimentalised, their parents demonised
- Research can obscure the causes and realities of issues such as neglect, rendering the most vulnerable people wholly responsible

Parents' accounts of poverty

- ATD 4th World
- Investments in children threatened by children wanting things, challenging them etc
- Respect
- Impact of cumulative trauma
- There can be little recognition from professionals of the realities of living with hardship 24/7
- Risk is individualised

The 'fully responsible' mother

- Julia had experienced a childhood of sexual abuse and had been in care.
- She had three children and had been subject to domestic abuse from a partner that she had separated from. When she found herself sinking into depression (a common consequence of cumulative trauma), she approached children's services for help.
- However, their response was to make the children subject to a child protection plan. This is a far from unusual response in recent years to situations where women experience domestic abuse.
- Because of increased awareness of the harm done to children when domestic abuse is occurring in families, it has been decisively re-framed as a child protection issue with the consequence that many women end up being positioned as responsible for abusing their children because they are being beaten up.

- In Julia's case her decision to separate was not considered enough evidence she was taking responsibility for her children's welfare as she had become depressed. This 'selfish' behaviour on her part needed monitoring because of the well-established links between maternal depression (paternal depression is not usually assessed as a risk factor interestingly) and neglect.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly Julia expressed to the researcher that she felt she had been 'bullied all her life', by her abusers and the services supposed to protect and support her. She felt strongly that the decision to make her children subject to a plan was stigmatising and punitive in a context where she had freely sought some help for herself and as a parent.

The 'marginal' father

- Abdul and Sam
- Non-resident fathers
- Immigration status
- Housing
- The distortions that adoption can wreak on considerations of support

Professional Support

- Parenting support
- On a continuum from regulatory to voluntary
- Messages about what is valued however are quite similar
- Participle
- How shame and othering are reproduced in everyday interactions?
- The respectable and the others

Social Support

- Absolutely compelling evidence now of its importance and its fragility in some contexts
- Loneliness and its impact upon health
- Beyond services?
- Peer –support projects for example

Ethics

- Differing meanings but asks us to think about ends, means, consequences ...
- Emphasis on dialogical processes
- Gets us away from technical language that obscures and instrumentalises
- Ethic of care and interdependence seems particularly relevant

Some References


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