

Inequality, corruption and mental well-being: who's the bigger villain?

Ioana van Deurzen, Wim van Oorschot, Erik van Ingen

Introduction

It is long acknowledged that the living environment has an important role for the mental well-being of individuals and factors such as poverty, inequality, noise or pollution have the capacity to influence their happiness, satisfaction and emotional well-being (Alesina, Di Tella, & MacCulloch, 2004; Prag, Mills, & Wittek, 2014; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Some of these environmental factors attracted more interest from the scientific community than others. A notable case is income inequality which was depicted as one of the greatest villains of our times: an insidious force subjecting individuals to threats to their social image and their self-worth on a daily basis, resulting in a climate of increased social tension and increased levels of stress (R. G. Wilkinson, 1999). As a result, some researchers argue, living in environments with higher levels of inequality would be associated with worse mental well-being (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010). In the present study we re-examine this alleged relationship between income inequality and mental well-being, for the following two main reasons.

First, despite strong claims in the literature, the empirical evidence linking inequality to the individuals' mental well-being is far from being undisputable, e.g., in a review of the studies linking inequality to depression, Muntaner, Eaton, Miech, and O'Campo (2004) found that this relationship was statistically significant only in 4 out of 6 reviewed studies. Furthermore, there seems to be a stronger effect between inequality and mental well-being among European countries than within other social contexts. For instance, Layte (2012) and Prag et al. (2014) both found a statistically significant relationship between inequality and different measures of mental well-being in different samples of European countries, while the relationship between income inequality of the US states and mental well-being was found to be not significant (Henderson, Liu, Diez Roux, Link, & Hasin, 2004), or this relationship was statistically significant but only for women (Kawachi & Gilman, 2014). However this does not seem to hold for all measures of mental well-being, as a recent study found no statistical relationship between inequality and happiness among 28 European countries (Zagorski, Evans, Kelley, & Piotrowska, 2014).