

The Uneven Distribution of Human (In)security Among Youth: The Social Health Consequences of Neoliberal Social Policy

Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

In 2009, British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published a groundbreaking book, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, in which they argue that severely unequal societies produce high rates of “social pain”: adverse outcomes including school dropout, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, lack of social trust, high mortality rates, violence and crime. Their volume challenges the belief that the extent of poverty in a community predicts negative outcomes and asserts instead that the size of the inequality gap defines materially and psychologically the chasm between the wealthiest and the most impoverished, enabling various forms of social suffering to saturate a community, appearing natural. In societies with large gaps, one finds rampant State and socially reproduced disregard, dehumanization, policy neglect and abuse. “Their” suffering is presumed tragic – or self imposed – but independent of “our” security. No surprise, the inequality gap of the U.S. ranks among the highest in their international comparisons.

Moving these notions into social psychology, we have been studying what we call *circuits of dispossession* and the *uneven distribution of human insecurities* as they affect the social health of privileged and marginalized youth in New York City: The Insecurity Gap and the social health consequences. We rely upon David Harvey’s writings on neo-liberalism in which he writes that “Accumulation by dispossession is about dispossessing somebody of their assets or their rights. We’re talking about the taking away of universal rights and the privatization of them so it [becomes] your particularly responsibility, rather than the responsibility of the state.” (Harvey, 2004, 2)

This paper will review a large scale qualitative and quantitative census of the human insecurity gap among a sample of 1100 NYC youth, documenting the social health consequences of dispossession and privilege. Polling for Justice is a large scale, participatory action research project, designed by a research collective of youth and adults, focused on youth experiences of (in)justice in education, health care and criminal justice. In this presentation I will review our participatory epistemology and methodology; introduce our theoretical analysis of circuits of dispossession and privilege as critical justice studies, and document the cumulative consequences of neo-liberal dispossession on the social health of youth in NYC.