

Thinking Equity: why a more equitable society might be a better place to live and some ideas for achieving it

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Introduction

This paper will argue that a more equitable society will be a more convivial and less addictive society in which to live. It will consider the characteristics of harmonious societies, examine the evidence that inequities within countries and between countries are growing, examine the link to patterns of alcohol consumption and end with a consideration of how a more equitable and addiction reduced society might be created.

My perspective is that of a social public health researcher without special expertise in alcohol studies.

What are the characteristics of harmonious societies?

Harmonious societies are those in which there is a balance between economic, social and environmental concerns. Such a society would be convivial, relatively more equitable, sustainable and adequately prosperous for all members of society. My argument is that such a society is likely to be relatively addiction free. By contrast a society which is very unequal, stresses economic considerations to the detriment of social and environmental is more likely to be prone to addictions.

Evidence that inequities are growing

Evidence suggests that economic inequities are increasing in OECD countries. This is a matter of concern because as Raymond Arons said “When inequities become too great the idea of community become impossible”. This is because society is likely to become a less convivial place to be – more division, less harmony, more stress for those at the bottom of the pile. Evidence of this comes from societies where there are considerable gaps in income and wealth and the result is usually a crime ridden society where the better off people have to hide behind walls of security. Cities in South Africa and South America are examples of such societies.

These gaps are also opening up between high income and low income countries.

Table 1: Ratio of World’s Richest Country and World’s Poorest Country

Year	Ratio
1820	3 to 1
1913	11 to 1
1950	35 to 1
1973	44 to 1
1992	72 to 1

Source: UNDP, 1999 & Worldwatch
Institute

These following statistics paint a picture of a world becoming less equal:

- About half the world's population, 3 billion people, live on less than US\$2 a day and of those about 1 billion live in extreme poverty of below US\$1 a day. (UNDP, 1998)
- In sub-Saharan Africa 20 countries have lower incomes per head in real terms than they had in the late 1970s.
- In the first seven decades of the 20th century wealth distribution in most countries grew more equal –since then the trend has been in opposite direction (Schneider, 2004).
- Walmart, owned by the Walton family in the United States has an estimated wealth of US\$27 billion which is higher than the GDP of Bangladesh with its population of 120 billion

In Australia a similar pattern is evident:

Gini coefficient measuring inequity has increased

- Wage income 15.5 %
- Market income 7.5%
- Gross income 6.7%
- Disposable income 7.4% (Saunders, 2002)

Stilwell notes that to get on the Rich 100 (compiled by the Australian Business Review Weekly) in 1983 required \$10 million; in 1993 it was \$30 million; and by 2004 it has risen to \$100 million. [6] This is a substantial increase well beyond the impact of inflation. From the same data base Stilwell notes that the total asset value of the wealthiest 200 Australians rose by 255% over the past decade. In 1993 the Rich 200 had a total wealth of \$28 billion compared with nearly \$71.5 billion in 2004. [6]

There is, of course, a large body of evidence that people on lower incomes suffer more illness and injury and die earlier (Baum, 2002). This is most evident in the case

of Indigenous Australians who have a 20 year lower life expectancy than other Australians.

What are the invisible impacts of inequity?

It is most likely that the growing inequities results from the neo-liberal policies of the past two decades which have seen a withdrawal from welfare state provisions and attempts to use the power of the state to redress market inequities. This has led to a growth of a philosophy of individualism which sees less emphasis on collective concerns including the pursuit of equity (see Baum 2002 Part 2 for more details of this argument). The sense of every person for themselves inevitably results in a less cohesive community and one in which “them” and “us” attitudes are more likely. People are less likely to be kind to one another and so an attitude of exclusion and protection results. There is a sense in which the “fair go” philosophy that did characterise Australia has been eroded. This is shown by the exclusionary policies in relation to refugees and in terms of the acceptance of measures to crack down on “dole cheats”.

Growing inequities may also result in a less trustful and cohesive society. In USA States income inequality strongly correlated with both per capita group membership ($r=-.40$ $P <.01$) and lack of social trust ($r=.76$, $P <.0001$) (Kawachi et al (1997) *Am J PH*, 87, 1491-1498)

The period of growing inequalities has occurred at a time of rapid social, economic and technological change which also an impact on society largely linked to processes of economic globalisation and the imposition of economic rationalisation. Giddens (1999, p. 19) noted the dislocation these processes cause:

It is shaking up our existing ways of life, no matter where we happen to be. This is not - at least at the moment - a global order driven by collective human will. Instead, it is emerging in an anarchic, haphazard, fashion, carried along by a mixture of influences. It is not settled or secure, but fraught with anxieties, as well as scarred by deep divisions. Many of us feel in the grip of forces over which we have no power.

Examples of current dislocation from economic rationalisation and processes of economic globalisation are:

- Capital withdrawing from communities e.g. Mitsubishi in Adelaide
- Decline of local businesses e.g. Delis in favour of regional shopping centres
- On-going displacement of Indigenous peoples
- Growing inequities – fuel for terrorism – wars on terrorism
- Time pressures and stress (average working hours in Australia are increasing)
- Roles for working class men less well-defined and this leads to growing suicide rates for young and middle –aged men.

So it is clear that we have a society that is becoming less comfortable for people by being less certain, less trusting, more insecure and rapidly changing.

Addictions and the inequitable society

It is very hard to sheet home direct casual relationships with the types of changes I have described above. But there is evidence that problems of addiction are increasing and it is likely that the deep causes of addiction reflect the dislocation caused by rapid economic change that disrupt traditional social bonds, ties and customs. Addictions are a means of coping with rapid social, economic and cultural change. Alcohol is also determinant of other epidemics – violence, mental illness, CVD, diabetes.

Alexander (???) summed these processes up when he noted:

As free market globalisation speeds up, so does the spread of dislocation and addiction. In order for “free markets” to be “free” the exchange of labour, land, currency and consumers goods must not be encumbered by elements of psycho-social integration such as clan loyalties, village responsibilities, guild or union rights, family obligations, social roles or religious values

There are numerous examples of when dislocation has lead to increase in alcohol addiction:

- Indigenous people in response to land and cultural invasion (see Brady, 2004 for discussion)
- Urbanisation in 18th England (Gin)
- Industrial revolution in Europe
- Post-Soviet Russia and the onslaught of free market economy – massive increase in alcoholism

Creating a more equitable and addiction reduced society

Most often we hear from politicians that “there is not alternative” to the economic rationalist processes. We hear that Soviet style socialism failed and that free market economies are the only option and that eventually through a trickle down effect everyone will benefit. Increasingly it is clear that everyone isn’t benefiting and the trickle down shows no signs of starting. But there are voices that are beginning to question the no alternative story. Gordon Brown, the UK Deputy Prime Minister and Nelson Mandela have called for concerted action to reduce poverty in Africa.

Mandela (quoted in Heywood and Altman, 2000, p.173) reminds us that:

...the very right to be human is every day denied to hundreds of millions of people as a result of poverty The unavailability of food, jobs, water and shelter, education, health care and a healthy environment. It is “not a preordained result of the forces of nature or the product of a curse of the deities. But the consequences of decisions which men and women take or refuse to take.

What might these alternatives be? I will finish with some suggestions that are just a starting point and urge this conference to consider the up stream factors that shape whether people use alcohol in a responsible way or not.

- More acceptance of need for state to intervene to achieve equity and social outcomes
- Redistribution explicit goal
- Thinking beyond individuals to structures that shape our experiences

- Creating local communities that balance economy, environment and community
- Need to restore faith in the idea of government as a servant of the community and guarantor of personal security and as an entity that will modify the market and ensure equity and redress market inequities. As Don Dunstan (1999) said:

Our response must be that we will intervene; we will intervene to retain our right to a say in our future, to temper the market place by action, to provide services and social justice, to retain institutional safeguards and provide needed development in the community interest, for we know that we intervene or we sink
- Redistribution of wealth as a strategy to promote health
 - Taxation
 - General wealth tax
 - Capital gains tax
 - Capital transfer tax
 - Death taxes
 - Tobin tax - discourage short-term currency trade and invest funds into international priorities to promote well-being and reduce inequity
 - Use taxes to invest in public and healthy infrastructure e.g. free education and health and social housing
 - Ideological support for unequal distribution of wealth - consumerist ethic, blaming the poor – eg media reports of “drug addicts”, “dole bludgers”, but not corporate cheats although this might be changing
- Thinking beyond individuals
 - Avoid victim blaming
 - Good structures usually encourage good behaviour
 - Balanced communities will be largely addiction free not because the people are “good” but because they have a supportive environment
- Create Balanced Communities
 - Resist domination from Multi-nationals – maintain local business and enterprise
 - Meeting spaces – hanging out – peer groups – green spaces – play spaces – third places
 - Good urban planning - human-centred not car centred
 - Real choices for people – not market driven choice
 - Reconsider consumer dominance

If these changes are brought about then it seems an addiction free society may be possible!

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