


Book Critique: A Comparative Analysis of Social Science and Public Health in Three Key Works

Kitap Eleştirisi: Üç Önemli Eserde Sosyal Bilimler ile Halk Sağlığının Karşılaştırmalı Analizi

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ABSTRACT

This critique offers a comparative analysis of three seminal works that explore the intersection of social science and public health: "The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better" by Wilkinson and Pickett, "The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World" by Marmot, and "Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts" edited by Marmot and Wilkinson. Each book examines how social inequalities, particularly income disparity, education, and employment, shape health outcomes, advocating for systemic changes to address these disparities. The critique emphasizes their shared focus on the social determinants of health, but highlights distinct contributions: The first book focuses on income inequality, the second explores global health disparities, and the third offers a multidisciplinary perspective on the broader social factors influencing health. These works collectively form an interdisciplinary framework that links social science to public health, advocating for policies that address the root causes of health inequities.

Keywords: social determinants of health, inequalities and inequities, global health disparities, interdisciplinary framework, public policy

ÖZ

Bu kitap eleştirisi, sosyal bilimler ile halk sağlığı arasındaki kesişimi inceleyen üç önemli eseri karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektedir. Wilkinson ve Pickett'in "Su Terazisi: Neden Daha Eşit Toplumlar, Neredeyse Her Zaman, Daha İyi Durumdadır?," Marmot'un "Sağlık Açığı: Eşitsiz Bir Dünyanın Meydan Okuması" ve Marmot ile Wilkinson'un editörlüğünde "Sağlığın Sosyal Belirleyicileri: Kati Gerçekler" isimli kitapları incelenmiştir. Üç çalışma da sosyal eşitsizliklerin, gelir farklarının, eğitim ve istihdamın sağlık üzerindeki etkilerini incelemekte ve çözüm önerisi niteliğinde sistemli değişiklikleri savunmaktadır. Eleştiride, kitapların ortak teması olan, "sağlığın sosyal belirleyicilerine" odaklanılmıştır. Yapılan değerlendirme sonucunda, her bir eserin farklı açıdan sunduğu katkılar vurgulanmıştır. İlk kitap gelir eşitsizliğini, ikinci kitap sağlıkta küresel eşitsizlikleri, üçüncü kitap ise, sağlık üzerinde etkili olan sosyal faktörleri, daha geniş ve disiplinler arası bir bakış açısıyla sunmaktadır. Kitaplar, sosyal bilimlerle halk sağlığını birbirine bağlayan bir çerçeve oluşturmaları yönüyle incelenmiştir. Yürütülen araştırma sonucunda, sağlık eşitsizliklerinin kökenine inen politikaların gerekliliği savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: sağlığın sosyal belirleyicileri, eşitsizlikler ve adaletsizlikler, sağlıkta küresel eşitsizlikler, disiplinler arası çerçeve, kamu politikası

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the relationship between social inequalities and public health has become an increasingly central concern in both academic and policy discussions. There is growing concern over social inequalities and public health. Persistent health disparities and the root causes of health inequalities need to be addressed (McCartney, Dickie, Escobar, & Collins, 2021).

Three critical books that combine themes of social sciences and public health are “The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better” by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, “The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World” by Michael Marmot, and “Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts” by Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson (Editors). These books examine this intersection through the lens of social science, offering critical insights into how structural inequalities impact public health outcomes. Each work contributes uniquely to the convergence, but together, they form a powerful and interdisciplinary framework for understanding the profound ways in which social and economic structures shape health.

“THE SPIRIT LEVEL: WHY MORE EQUAL SOCIETIES ALMOST ALWAYS DO BETTER”

Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett

This book examines how income inequality impacts various social and health outcomes, drawing on data from multiple countries. It argues that societies with lower income inequality tend to have better public health, lower crime rates, higher educational attainment, and improved overall social outcomes. The authors highlight that greater income equality is strongly linked to better performance in areas such as education, mental health, life expectancy, and social mobility. By emphasizing the intersection of social science, economics, and public health, the book makes a compelling case that reducing social inequalities can improve public health outcomes. It's a thought-provoking read. The thesis is bold and straightforward (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) **[Image 1]**. An editorial supports the argument made in “The Spirit Level” by emphasizing the broad health impacts of income inequality. While the book highlights how more equal societies tend to have better overall outcomes, the article focuses on the “mortality gradient,” showing that inequality affects health across all social classes, not just the poorest. Both works argue for addressing social determinants of health (Hull, 2010).

The book highlights the intersection between social sciences and public health by framing health disparities as stemming from broader social and economic contexts rather than just access to medical care. They argue that inequality, shaped by structural forces like income disparity and social policies, is a fundamental cause of health inequities. This perspective directly challenges the traditional biomedical model, shifting the focus from individual behaviors to systemic factors that affect population health. By integrating social science insights, their approach calls for public health strategies that address the root causes of inequality, advocating for a more comprehensive, societal-level approach to improving health outcomes.

“THE HEALTH GAP: THE CHALLENGE OF AN UNEQUAL WORLD”

Michael Marmot

Michael Marmot’s “The Health Gap” builds on his previous work, notably the Whitehall Studies, to explore the global and local dimensions of health inequality. Marmot argues that health disparities are not inevitable but are the result of social, economic, and political decisions. Central to Marmot’s analysis is the concept of the “social gradient” in health, which describes

how health outcomes improve as one moves up the social hierarchy. The book posits that the root causes of health inequality lie in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, conditions that are themselves shaped by social policies. In his book, Michael Marmot explores the deep and persistent disparities in health across different social and economic groups. He argues that social inequalities, such as differences in income, education, and access to health care, are key determinants of health outcomes, with those in lower socio-economic positions experiencing significantly worse health. Marmot presents compelling evidence that these inequalities are not only a matter of individual lifestyle choices but are shaped by structural factors that perpetuate disadvantage. He emphasizes the need for societal reforms to address these disparities, advocating for policies that reduce social inequities and promote fairer distribution of resources, ultimately improving health for all. The book calls for a broader, more holistic understanding of health that includes social justice as a central component (Marmot, 2016) **[Image 1]**. In a journal article the following year, the author argues that health inequalities are driven by social and economic conditions, not just individual choices. He highlights the stark contrast between poverty in affluent societies and stresses the need for action to reduce inequities, particularly among children, low-income and disadvantaged groups, workers, and older adults. Marmot emphasizes the importance of early childhood development, education, and improving working conditions to reduce health disparities across the life course. He advocates for systemic change, calling for policies that address these issues from local to global levels. The article concludes with a message of hope, showing that meaningful change is possible with the right commitment and evidence-based actions. (Marmot, 2017a). The commentaries on the symposium article, by the same and scholars, critically examined a range of issues, including social determinants of health, social discrimination, social justice, social responsibility, and the complexities and uncertainties inherent in addressing health disparities (Bhugra, 2017; Marmot, 2017b; Reeves, 2017).

In terms of the intersection between social science and public health, “The Health Gap” emphasizes the importance of addressing the social determinants of health, such as income, education, and employment, through policy interventions. Marmot’s writing provides a critical insight into the ways that social science frameworks can illuminate public health challenges. He extends the analysis of social inequalities into the realm of global health, showing how disparities in health outcomes are not confined to wealthy nations but are global phenomena that require urgent attention and action. This global perspective is key, as the author shows how health disparities are not just local issues, but are deeply intertwined with international economic and political structures.

“SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH: THE SOLID FACTS”

Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson (Editors)

Edited by Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson, this book examines how social, economic, and environmental factors influence health outcomes. It explores how conditions like income inequality, education, employment, housing, and health care access affect individual and population health. The book highlights the link between social factors and health, showing that poorer individuals often experience worse health and shorter lifespans. It also addresses psychological and social influences such as stress, early life conditions, social exclusion, and working environments. Emphasizing the role of public policy, the editors argue that health is shaped not just by individual behaviors or medical care, but by the broader social conditions people live in. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, the book advocates for systemic policy

changes to reduce health disparities and promote health equity, particularly for disadvantaged populations (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003) [Image 1].

The book compiles contributions on the social gradient, stress, early life, social exclusion, work, unemployment, social support, addiction, food, transport from leading experts in public health and social science to explore how social, environmental, and economic factors affect health outcomes across different populations. The social determinants framework, in this volume, is expanded to include considerations of race, gender, and global economic systems, as well as access to education, health care, and housing. The book's strength lies in its multidisciplinary approach. By including contributions from economists, sociologists, and epidemiologists, the collection emphasizes the value of social science in public health, showing how an interdisciplinary approach is essential for understanding and addressing health inequities. This volume effectively bridges theory and practice, linking the academic insights of social science to practical public health strategies and interventions. It offers a comprehensive look at the role of social factors in health and provides evidence-based policy recommendations to address the root causes of health disparities.



Image 1. The anterior covers of books, “*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*” by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, “*The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World*” by Michael Marmot, and “*Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts*” by Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson (Editors).

THEMES AND INTERSECTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Across all three works, the integration of social science into public health analysis is a dominant theme. Each book argues that health is not merely an individual or biological phenomenon but is deeply embedded in social structures. The influence of factors such as income inequality, education, employment, social support, and living conditions on health is highlighted repeatedly. What these books collectively demonstrate is that addressing public health challenges requires a broad, systemic approach that goes beyond health care systems and touches upon social, political, and economic policies.

The role of inequality

Inequality is central to all three works. Whether it's the national-level income inequality discussed in “*The Spirit Level*” or the global health disparities outlined in “*The Health Gap*”,

the relationship between inequality and health is a recurring focus. Social science theories, such as the concept of the “social gradient,” are employed to show that societies with less inequality tend to have better public health outcomes overall, with a more equitable distribution of well-being across social groups.

Social determinants framework

All three books argue that social determinants—conditions like housing, education, and employment—are fundamental to understanding health disparities. This theme connects the two fields of social science and public health, where policies aimed at improving social conditions are seen as essential for improving public health. The books advocate for upstream interventions, targeting the root causes of health inequities rather than simply addressing the symptoms.

Global perspectives

While much of the public health discourse has historically been concerned with localized issues, both “The Health Gap” and “Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts” take a global approach. They argue that health inequities are not just domestic problems but are linked to global economic systems, trade policies, and international health disparities. This global perspective challenges the traditional boundaries between “local” public health and broader social science concerns.

Policy implications

A recurring focus across the works is the need for policy changes. Both “The Spirit Level” and “The Health Gap” call for redistributive policies, such as progressive taxation, better access to education, and the strengthening of social safety nets, in order to reduce inequality and improve population health. In “Social Determinants of Health”, the contributors stress the importance of evidence-based policies that can address the complex, interrelated factors contributing to health disparities.

Challenges and limitations in implementing policy recommendations

While the books under review collectively argue for sweeping policy changes to address health inequalities, the practical implementation of these recommendations presents significant challenges. One of the most notable concerns is the feasibility of redistributive policies like progressive taxation, which, while potentially effective in reducing income inequality, may face strong political resistance, particularly in countries with entrenched neoliberal economic policies. Critics argue that the focus on income redistribution oversimplifies the complex causes of health inequities, potentially overlooking other influential factors such as cultural attitudes, individual behaviors, or the role of private sector actors in shaping health care access.

The concept of the “social gradient,” the idea that health outcomes improve as inequality decreases, has furthermore been critiqued for its potential oversimplification of the relationship between inequality and health. Some argue that focusing primarily on income inequality may ignore other dimensions of inequality, such as race, gender, and education, which also play critical roles in shaping health outcomes. Debates persist over the interpretation of income inequality data, with some questioning whether the correlation between inequality and health outcomes is as robust as suggested. In some contexts, countries with high levels of income inequality, still exhibit pockets of excellent health care outcomes,

suggesting that factors beyond income distribution may be at play. While the policy recommendations outlined in these books are compelling, their practical application requires a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political contexts in which they are proposed, as well as an acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of health disparities.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE THREE BOOKS ON THE THEMES OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Table 1. A comparative outline comparing and contrasting the three books on the themes of social sciences and public health.

	“The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better”	“The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World”	“Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts”
Authors/Editors	Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett	Michael Marmot	Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson (Editors)
Primary focus	Examines the correlation between income inequality and social outcomes like health, crime, and education.	Explores global health disparities, focusing on the social determinants of health and the “social gradient.”	A compilation of essays examining how social, economic, and environmental factors influence health outcomes.
Key thesis	Societies with less income inequality tend to have better overall outcomes (health, education, crime).	Health inequalities are largely determined by social, economic, and political factors; these inequalities are preventable.	Health is determined not just by medical care, but by a range of social, economic, and environmental factors.
Social science approach	Uses cross-national data to show how income inequality affects a variety of social and health outcomes.	The social gradient in health: those lower on the social ladder experience worse health, which is shaped by the conditions in which they live.	Multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from economists, sociologists, and epidemiologists to understand health disparities.
Public health perspective	Advocates for addressing inequality as a means to improve public health outcomes, moving beyond the biomedical model.	Argues that health inequities are shaped by the social determinants of health, calling for policy reform to address these disparities.	Highlights the importance of tackling social determinants (education, housing, employment, etc.) through systemic change to improve health.
Global vs. local focus	Primarily focuses on cross-country comparisons but includes some local examples.	Explores health disparities on both global and local scales, emphasizing how social and economic policies affect health across countries.	Primarily focused on global and national contexts, addressing health disparities in both wealthy and low-income countries.

Evidence base	Relies heavily on statistical data comparing countries with varying levels of income inequality.	Uses a wide range of research, including Marmot's own studies like the Whitehall Studies, to show how health is affected by socio-economic conditions.	Presents a collection of research studies and essays from global experts on social determinants of health.
Policy implications	Advocates for redistributive policies (e.g., progressive taxation, reducing income inequality) to improve societal health.	Emphasizes the need for societal reforms that reduce inequalities in education, income, and health care access.	Calls for comprehensive policy changes at local, national, and global levels to address social determinants and reduce health inequities.
Interdisciplinary approach	Primarily social science (economics, sociology) with a focus on statistical analysis.	Incorporates insights from public health, social sciences, and policy studies.	Strong interdisciplinary focus, combining public health, economics, sociology, and policy studies.
Impact of structural inequalities	Strong emphasis on the role of income inequality in shaping social and health outcomes.	Health disparities are deeply rooted in structural inequalities (e.g., class, gender, race).	Focuses on how broader social and environmental structures influence health, not just individual behavior.
Critiques of current systems	Critiques current capitalist models that perpetuate inequality, advocating for more equitable systems.	Critiques current policies that fail to address the root causes of health disparities, advocating for more equitable health systems globally.	Critiques current health systems that focus on individual behavior rather than addressing social causes of health inequalities.
Target audience	General public, policymakers, and those interested in the relationship between inequality and societal outcomes.	Academics, policymakers, and those interested in understanding global health inequalities and how to address them.	Academics, researchers, and public health professionals interested in social determinants and policy solutions.
Unique contribution	Provides a clear, data-driven argument linking income inequality with various aspects of social well-being.	Offers a global perspective on the social gradient in health and emphasizes the preventability of health inequalities.	Serves as a comprehensive resource on the social determinants of health, drawing on a range of global perspectives and research.

The key takeaways from the three books reveal a shared focus on the connection between social inequalities and public health, though each takes a distinct approach. "The Spirit Level" centers on income inequality as a root cause of broader social and health disparities, using cross-national data to demonstrate the benefits of more equitable societies. "The Health Gap," building on Michael Marmot's previous work, emphasizes the importance of addressing social gradients and global health inequalities, arguing that health outcomes are deeply influenced by social policies.

“Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts” offers a broader, multidisciplinary perspective, exploring how various social factors, such as education, employment, and housing, affect health outcomes, and advocating for systemic change across multiple sectors [Table 1]. While each book highlights the need to address social inequalities to improve public health, they contribute to a rich, interdisciplinary conversation on how societal structures shape health outcomes, with each offering valuable insights from different angles.

This article recalls a significant event within the international medical and public health academic community. The image features Sir Michael Gideon Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health (MBBS, MPH, PhD), and Dr. Verda Tunalıgil (MD, MPH, PhD) at the 2016 “War, Migration, and Health: What Should Physicians Do?” Symposium, organized by the World Medical Association, the Turkish Medical Association, and the Istanbul Medical Chamber, was held on February 26-27, 2016 (Friday-Saturday) in Istanbul, Turkey [Image 2].



Image 2. *Sir Michael Gideon Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health (MBBS, MPH, PhD) and Dr. Verda Tunalıgil (MD, MPH, PhD) at the “War, Migration, and Health: What Should Physicians Do?” Symposium, organized by the World Medical Association, the Turkish Medical Association, and the Istanbul Medical Chamber on February 26-27, 2016 Friday-Saturday in İstanbul, Türkiye.*

CONCLUSIONS

The intersection of social science and public health in these three books offers a compelling argument for a more holistic understanding of health, one that goes beyond the individual to consider the structural forces shaping well-being. Through their exploration of inequality, social determinants, and global health, Wilkinson, Pickett, Marmot, and their colleagues contribute to a powerful discourse on how societies can be organized to promote health and reduce disparities. These works not only illuminate the causes of health inequities but also offer actionable insights that can inform policy and foster social change. As public health increasingly turns toward social science to explain and address health disparities, these books remain essential readings for understanding the critical links between social conditions and health outcomes.

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- 2- Research and publication ethics have been fully adhered to in this study.

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