



## We're not rich, but we're definitely not poor: Young children's conceptions of social class



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### ABSTRACT

Relative deprivation theory suggests that perceived socioeconomic standing has implications for multiple aspects of life. Early childhood is critical for later development and concern about effects of rising inequality on children has grown along with inequality in recent decades. However, one of the key requirements for relative deprivation to matter for child outcomes is that children must have a sense of social class and their socioeconomic standing. Because the voices of children are often lost among current debates, this paper poses two questions: 1) How do young children conceive of social class and their standing in the distribution in the context of high inequality; and 2) How do these conceptions develop over time? We conducted longitudinal, semi-structured interviews with 44 young children (ages 5–6), who attend the same three elementary schools in a small Midwestern city. By following the same children over two years, this study is uniquely able to shed light on how conceptions of class develop over time. We found that, as children got older, they increasingly associated money with differences in quality, became more likely to assign value judgements to money, and became less reliant on verbal proof of wealth. Although many children misreport their own socioeconomic standing, our findings suggest young children are aware of social class inequality and may therefore experience relative deprivation. Reducing inequality could mitigate potential implications of relative deprivation for child development.

Relative deprivation is the theory that how people perceive their own economic situation or living standards depends on the circumstances of others (Walker & Smith, 2002). Subjective well-being, in other words, can differ markedly from objective measures of well-being (Crosby, 1976). Some arguments suggest that inequality – in particular, a sense of relative deprivation – is negatively related to health, education, and a variety of other outcomes for both children and adults (Wilkinson, 1994; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007, 2009). Others contradict this argument, suggesting that the relationship lacks empirical support (Snowdon, 2010).

A growing body of evidence illustrates that investments and financial resources are particularly critical early in life (Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2007). It makes sense, therefore, that research and policy debates are particularly concerned about the potential consequences of inequality for children. However, often lost among these debates, frequently based on quantitative evidence, are the experiences and voices of children. One of the key requirements for inequality and relative deprivation to matter for child outcomes is that children must have a sense of their position in society. If young children have limited awareness of social inequality and their relative standing

on the socioeconomic distribution, then as long as their essential needs are met they may be relatively immune to rising inequality. If, on the other hand, young children are attuned to socioeconomic inequalities and their relative location in that distribution, then they may be sensitive to the rising inequality experienced in recent decades (Keister, 2000; Piketty, 2014; Piketty & Saez, 2014; Wolff, 1995).

It is well established that adolescents – and even children as young as 7 or 8 – are aware of poverty and inequality (e.g., Farthing, 2016; Fortier, 2006; Sutton, 2009), partly reflecting a sense of social exclusion among poor children at school (Ridge, 2002). Yet this research often focuses on poor children and those who have already spent at least a few years in school (see Attree, 2006 for a review). Given the critical importance of early childhood for later development, we need to know more about how young children from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds understand social class.

Social class is a complex, contested concept and there is little agreement about its definition (Lareau, 2008; Weeden & Grusky, 2012; Wright, 2005). Conley (2008) makes the case for an umbrella or folk concept of social class, which encompasses multiple aspects of inequality, including income, education, occupation, and wealth. Given

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disagreement about the concept, as well as the goal of this article to gain a sense of how young children understand this complex concept, we adopt a broad concept of social class. Money, which is related to all aspects of class, provides a comprehensible entrée into the topic for children.

Through longitudinal, semi-structured interviews with young children (ages 5 and 6), we sought to understand how young children describe social class and come to recognize class distinctions. By following the same children over time, this study is uniquely able to shed light on how children's conceptions of class develop over time. This paper poses two questions: 1) How do young children conceive of social class and their standing in the distribution in the context of high inequality; and 2) How do these conceptions develop over time? By shedding light on the thoughts and experiences of young children from across the income distribution, we hope to inform efforts to mitigate potentially negative effects of rising inequality.

## 1. The importance of child conceptions of class

Research with children suggests potentially complex understandings of class inequality. Pugh (2009) depicts the connection between consumer culture and child dignity, often with heartrending detail. Through extensive observations and interactions with children, as well as interviews with parents, she finds that children from all social classes and racial backgrounds struggle to achieve a sense of belonging and dignity among their peers through their possessions and experiences. Parents across the economic distribution work to identify and provide appropriate items that will allow their children to feel cared for and protected from social exclusion. For children, Pugh (2009) suggests, possessions and experiences are central to their ability to belong and maintain dignity.

Just as adults in our society equate net worth with self-worth (Sennett & Cobb, 1972), children seem to relate consumption and possessions with self-worth. To what extent are they aware, however, of the adult system of stratification? Pugh (2009) notes that upper class children often desire the “wrong” things (e.g., cheap, poor quality goods marketed to children on television, as opposed to items of higher quality and status) from the perspectives of their parents, who aim to steer their children toward upper class tastes. Similarly, Milner (2006) notes the distinct social status system of adolescents, who often value behaviors that directly contradict adult status systems (e.g., reckless behavior, at least feigned indifference to school work, and valuation of peer status over academic success). The consumer culture of children and its related ranking system, in other words, may be quite different from the social class system of adults.

Scholars of children and youth have documented the multiple ways in which children actively create their own social worlds (Corsaro, 1979, 1981, 1997). Thorne (1993), for example, shows how elementary school children perform and actively create gender. Others illustrate how young children (aged 3–6) construct race and racism (Connolly, 1998; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). These studies suggest that children develop awareness and understandings of socially constructed concepts from a very young age.

Compared to gender and race, however, the social construction of class among children has received relatively little attention. Milner (2006) portrays the complex status systems adolescents create, often in opposition to those of adults. Pugh (2009) documents the patrolling work that children do to police boundaries of which children have which possessions or experiences. Calarco (2011) illustrates the active role children take in the creation of their own schooling, and the inequalities they produce.

Based on these careful studies, we know the critical importance of hearing directly from children, in their own voices, about topics adults often assume children simply acquire from adults. As Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) illustrate, children are not empty vessels; they do not simply acquire adult knowledge in Piagetian, linear fashion as they age.

Rather, children build their own social worlds and acquire knowledge through interaction and experience. Thus, if we hope to understand child conceptions of class, we need to hear directly from children. By learning how children conceive of social class, we can begin to understand more about children, the social systems they create, and how they might be influenced by rising inequality. For example, if children are aware of social class differences as early as ages 5 or 6, learning how they conceive of social class could provide insight into how inequalities matter and are internalized by young children. If we knew which aspects of social class are salient for young children, educators and social service providers would be better able to combat the detrimental effects of inequality. At the same time, the perceptions of children will raise a mirror to the social class system of adults, allowing us to view the system we have created through different eyes.

### 1.1. Existing research on child conceptions of class

In the 1960s and 1970s, Coles (1977) documented the perspectives of children ages 5 to 14 from various backgrounds throughout the U.S. This five-volume work, called *Children of Crisis*, sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of children during a period of drastic change. Since then, Kozol's works (e.g., *Savage Inequalities*, *Amazing Grace*, and *The Shame of the Nation*) offer rich insights into the lives of a more recent generation of children growing up in poor neighborhoods. These and other works powerfully illustrate the vast differences in children's lives and views of the world, often despite geographic proximity. Coles (1977, p. 386), for example, juxtaposes the strong sense of entitlement among wealthy children to the migrant child who “once told [him] in a matter-of-fact way that he had no expectation of living beyond twenty.” These children, Coles suggests, “knew the score.” In other words, they were aware of their life chances in their society. This awareness of life chances found by Coles and others hints at an awareness or understanding of social class, but does not directly identify how young children conceive of social class.

A small, but growing body of research has begun to investigate how children understand social class and their place in the distribution. Using interviews, and in some cases tasks such as categorizing or describing photographs (e.g., Naimark, 1981; Percy, 2003), these studies seek to learn directly from children about their views of poverty (Weinger, 1998; Ridge, 2002; Trzcinski, 2002; Fortier, 2006; Walker, Crawford, & Taylor, 2008; Hakovirta & Kallio, 2016; Farthing, 2016; see Attree, 2006 and Ridge, 2011 for reviews) or of social class more generally (Leahy, 1981, 1983, 1990; Ramsey, 1991; Weinger, 2000; Sutton, 2009; Sigelman, 2012). Research on subjective social status, for example, has examined how children perceive their social status and how it relates to their concepts of social class (Mistry, Brown, White, Chow, & Gillen-O'Neel, 2015). These studies offer critical insight into children's perceptions and suggest that children are acutely aware of class inequality and “know their place” in its distribution (Goodman et al., 2001; Mistry et al., 2015; Weinger, 1998). Further, evidence suggests that children's understanding of class differences may develop from a focus on observable characteristics to perceived psychological characteristics (Leahy, 1981, 1983, 1990; Naimark, 1981; Ramsey, 1991).

Despite their important contributions, however, the existing literature has several limitations. First, these studies interview children from various ages at around the same time period rather than interviewing the same children over time (e.g., Sigelman, 2012; Leahy, 1981, 1983, 1990; see Ridge & Millar, 2011 for an exception that focuses on poor families rather than children). Without longitudinal data, these studies can infer changes over time with age, but they cannot observe that change directly within the same children. Longitudinal interviews could improve on these cross-sectional studies. Other studies include children from a wide age range, but with limited discussion of differences by age. Weinger (1998, 2000), for example, includes children ages 5–12 or 5–14 years. Percy (2003) includes children ages 6–12 years. It is

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