



Personal relative deprivation and risk: An examination of individual differences in personality, attitudes, and behavioral outcomes



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ABSTRACT

Substantial epidemiological evidence has linked societal-level inequality and outcomes associated with risk-taking (e.g., teen pregnancy, crime, violence). However, little research has examined whether downstream psychological consequences of inequality are similarly associated with risk-related outcomes. We examined whether subjective feelings of personal relative deprivation—a key affective consequence of competitive disadvantage and victimization by inequality—were associated with risk-related individual differences in a diverse community sample ($n = 328$). Personal relative deprivation was associated with personality traits associated with risk (high impulsivity, low self-control, and facets of sensation-seeking), risk-related attitudes (in ethical, gambling, and health/safety domains), and behavioral outcomes (gambling and problem gambling, future discounting, antisocial conduct, and criminal outcomes), but not with two laboratory behavioral risk tasks. Together, the results indicate that subjective feelings of relative deprivation predict individual differences in key personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors associated with risk.

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1. Introduction

Inequality at the societal level has been associated with a wide variety of negative social and health outcomes (reviewed in Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006, 2007, 2009). Many of these negative consequences of inequality involve risk-taking, including sexual promiscuity and teenage pregnancy, violence, drug and substance abuse, and crime (reviewed in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006, 2007, 2009). These outcomes are all risky because they involve high outcome variance (a definition of risk widely used throughout the behavioral sciences; reviewed in Mishra, 2014).

Although there is ample evidence for an inequality-risk link at the societal level, surprisingly little research has examined whether psychological consequences of inequality are associated with individual differences in risky behavior and personality. One key individual-level outcome of inequality is personal relative deprivation, which describes subjective feelings of anger, resentment, and frustration in response to negative social comparisons with relevant others (Bernstein & Crosby, 1980; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Personal relative deprivation is an affective consequence of inequality, facilitated by comparisons

between “haves” and “have-nots” (Smith et al., 2012). That is, feelings of relative deprivation are consequences of perceived competitive disadvantage relative to relevant others.

Growing evidence and theorizing suggest that competitive disadvantage is associated with greater risk-taking consistent with risk-sensitivity theory (e.g., Ermer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2008; Hill & Buss, 2010; Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumière, 2014; Wilson & Daly, 1985; reviewed in Mishra, 2014). Risk-sensitivity theory predicts that people will shift from baseline risk-aversion to risk-preference in circumstances that reflect conditions of need, where need describes disparity between one's present and one's desired (or goal) state (Mishra & Lalumière, 2010; reviewed in Mishra, 2014). Those who are competitively disadvantaged may not be able to achieve desired outcomes through low-risk means, and may instead switch to high-risk, high variance strategies that at least offer a chance of meeting one's needs. Victims of inequality are necessarily competitively disadvantaged, and those who are competitively disadvantaged experience greater feelings of relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012). As a consequence, personal relative deprivation is an affective proximate mechanism that should be associated with greater risk-propensity and risk-taking.

Some extant individual-level evidence is suggestive of a link between personal relative deprivation and risk. Bernburg, Thorlindsson, and Sigfusdottir (2009) demonstrated that people who experienced relative economic deprivation were more likely to engage in delinquency and violence. Across several studies, Callan and colleagues showed that personal relative deprivation is associated with gambling urges and problem

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gambling tendencies (Callan, Ellard, Shead, & Hodgins, 2008; Callan, Shead, & Olson, 2011, 2015). Experimentally manipulated feelings of relative deprivation have also been shown to affect gambling behavior (Callan et al., 2008, 2011). Other research has shown that relative deprivation predicts gambling engagement for those who perceive gambling to be a path to upward economic mobility (a finding consistent with risk-sensitivity theory; Tabri, Dupuis, Kim, & Wohl, 2015). Although these findings are suggestive, no studies, to our knowledge, have directly examined whether personal relative deprivation is associated with individual differences in risk-taking and risk-propensity conceived broadly.

In the following, we present a study examining whether feelings of relative deprivation are associated with individual differences in numerous manifestations of risk—namely, personality traits associated with risk (impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and low self-control), risk-accepting attitudes, behavioral risk-taking (including future discounting), antisocial behavior, criminal outcomes, and gambling. Personality traits associated with risk, including sensation-seeking, impulsivity, and low self-control have been consistently associated with persistent engagement in various forms of real-world risk-taking (e.g., Jones & Quisenberry, 2004, Mishra, Lalumière, Morgan, & Williams, 2011, Mishra, Lalumière, & Williams, 2010, Zuckerman, 2007). Risk-accepting attitudes describe people's favorable or unfavorable feelings toward various risky behaviors (Blais & Weber, 2006). Behavioral risk-taking describes preference for high variance outcomes over low variance outcomes (e.g., the choice of \$5 guaranteed over a 10% chance of \$50). Future discounting—the tendency to prefer smaller, immediate rewards to larger, later rewards—is considered by some to be a manifestation of risk-taking (e.g., Hill, Jenkins, & Farmer, 2008, Reynolds, 2006). Finally, antisocial behavior, crime, and gambling have all been argued to be instantiations of a broader “taste for risk” (e.g., Jones & Quisenberry, 2004). Substantial evidence suggests that these outcomes, along with other risky behaviors, tend to co-occur among individuals, consistent with a “generality of deviance” account (e.g., Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994, Jones & Quisenberry, 2004).

This study extends previous research in several ways. First, we utilize a diverse community sample recruited to maximize variability in relative deprivation and risk-propensity. Second, we examine risk conceived broadly. Previous research has focused on such specific outcomes as gambling or delinquency, instead of a suite of risk-related traits, behaviors, and outcomes. Finally, we specifically measure *subjective* personal feelings of relative deprivation. This approach is a key strength of the current study given that most other studies examining relative deprivation have relied on socioeconomic measures (e.g., economic inequality) rather than directly measuring people's personal experience of deprivation. We predicted that personal relative deprivation would be broadly associated with individual differences in behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits associated with risk.

2. Methods

A total of 328 participants (160 men, 165 women, 3 unreported sex; age: $M = 31.0$, $SD = 12.5$, range: 18 to 73) were recruited using posters in the general community, the local university and college, homeless shelters, local employment offices, food banks, and the John Howard Society (a non-profit organization dedicated to re-integrating former prisoners into general society). Participants were recruited from these diverse sources in order to maximize variance in measures of interest, particularly reported relative deprivation, risk-propensity, and engagement in risk-taking behaviors. The same participants were used in Mishra and Carleton (in press) to answer different research questions on mental and physical health. All participants were provided with \$30 compensation for their time. Participants also received compensation from individual decision-making tasks as described below. All of the following measures were presented in random order on a computer to each participant.

2.1. Relative deprivation

Relative deprivation was measured using the *Personal Relative Deprivation Scale* (Callan et al., 2008), a four-item measure of the degree to which people feel subjectively deprived relative to others (e.g., “I feel resentful when I see how prosperous other people seem to be”). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This measure has been demonstrated to have acceptable internal consistency (Callan et al., 2011), and has been previously associated with gambling urges (Callan et al., 2008) and poorer physical and mental health (Mishra & Carleton, in press).

2.2. Personality traits associated with risk

2.2.1. Impulsivity

Impulsivity was assessed using *Eysenck's Impulsivity Scale* (Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, & Allsopp, 1985), which consists of 19 yes/no statements about impulsive behaviors. This measure has been used in hundreds of studies and has been shown to have high reliability and validity (reviewed in Webster & Jackson, 1997).

2.2.2. Sensation-seeking

Sensation-seeking was assessed using the *Sensation-Seeking Scale* (Zuckerman, 1994), which consists of 40 choices between paired statements regarding preferences for varied, stimulating experiences and disinhibited behavior. The items make up four subscales: boredom susceptibility, disinhibition, experience seeking, and thrill and adventure seeking. This measure has been used in many thousands of studies and has been shown to be highly reliable and valid (reviewed in Zuckerman, 2007).

2.2.3. Self-control

Self-control was assessed using the *Retrospective Behavioral Self-Control Scale* (Marcus, 2003). It consists of 67 items, measuring the frequency of behaviors associated with low self-control in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Behaviors were rated on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Scores were reversed so that higher scores indicated greater self-control. This measure has been associated with a number of different risk-related outcomes and has high internal reliability (>.91) and test-retest reliability (.89) (Marcus, 2003).

2.3. Risk-accepting attitudes

Risk-accepting attitudes in multiple domains were assessed using the revised *Domain Specific Risk-Taking Scale* (DOSPERT; Blais & Weber, 2006; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002), which measures likelihood of engagement in 30 risky behaviors in six domains of life: ethical, financial, gambling health/safety, social, and recreational. Behaviors were rated on a scale from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). The DOSPERT has been widely used, including cross-culturally, and has been shown to have high internal reliability (approximately .78) and moderate test-retest reliability (approximately .65) (reviewed in Blais & Weber, 2006).

2.4. Behavioral outcomes

2.4.1. Future discounting

Future discounting was assessed through 27 monetary choices between smaller, immediate rewards and larger, later rewards. (e.g., “Would you rather have \$24 tonight or \$35 in 25 days?”; Kirby, Petry, & Bickel, 1999). One of the choices was chosen at random at the end of the task and participants received money in the amount of their choice in the form of a cheque (either immediately cashable, or post-dated to the relevant date in the future). The dependent measure was a discounting parameter (k) calculated for each of the subsets of small, medium, or large rewards (Kirby et al., 1999). Higher discounting parameters indicated greater preference for smaller, immediate rewards. This

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