



What fosters concern for inequality among American adolescents?



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ABSTRACT

Understanding cultural beliefs about social and economic inequality is vital to discerning the roadblocks and pathways to addressing that inequality. The foundation of concern for inequality is laid during adolescence, yet scholars understand little about the factors that influence whether and how adolescents come to express such concern. Arguing that structural and cultural contexts are just as consequential as whether adolescents themselves are members of disadvantaged groups, I draw on four theoretical perspectives to identify factors that influence adolescents' concern for addressing inequality: the underdog thesis, intergroup contact theory, the education enlightens thesis, and ideological buttressing. Using representative restricted-use Educational Longitudinal Survey data, I find that 12th-graders' beliefs are indeed influenced by more than their own demography: the diversity of their social milieu, the content of education in and out of the classroom, and ideological buttressing via political region and entertainment all influence whether they express concern for addressing inequality. These findings suggest extensions and amendments to the four theoretical perspectives and underscore the importance of studying structural and cultural factors that shape beliefs about inequality. The results also point to several interventions that may increase students' concern for inequality: involvement in civic-oriented extracurricular activities, more education in academic subjects that consider inequality, nurturing of cross-race friendships, and increased leisure reading.

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1. Introduction

Social and economic inequality is perpetuated in part because such inequality is culturally tolerated (Emler and Dickinson, 2005; Fischer et al., 1996). Popular accounts of inequality tend to consider a substantial amount of economic disadvantage to be fair and blame systemic differences in outcomes for women, racial/ethnic minorities, and the poor on individual preferences, dispositions, and biology (Bobo et al., 2012; Hunt, 2007; Kane, 2000; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). The extent to which individuals express concern for inequality can influence their treatment of members of disadvantaged groups and their support for policies that undermine or perpetuate inequality (Burstein, 1985; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Lee et al., 1992). As such, understanding whether and how individuals come to be concerned about inequality is vital to understanding the roadblocks and pathways to addressing social disadvantages (Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

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Table 1

Variable operationalization, weighted means and standard errors.

Measure	Value Range	Mean	Sd Dev
Dependent variables			
Concern for inequality: “How important is each of the following to you in your life: working to correct social and economic inequalities” [12th-grade]	1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important	1.866	0.686
Concern for inequality [10th grade]	1 = not imp. to 3 = very imp.	1.870	0.659
Importance to R of helping others in community	1 = not imp. to 3 = very imp.	2.220	0.609
Underdog thesis measures			
Ascriptive measures			
Female	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.524	0.499
African-American	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.077	0.267
Hispanic	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.107	0.309
Asian/Asian American	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.079	0.269
Native American	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.004	0.065
Multiracial	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.043	0.202
White	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.691	0.462
Non-English spoken at home	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.122	0.327
Socio-Economic Status (NELS composite variable of five standardized components: father's and mother's educational levels, father's and mother's occupations, and family income)	–3 to 3	0.197	0.726
Emotional disability in 8th grade, as reported by parent	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.014	0.118
Physical disability in 8th grade (hearing, visual, or motor) as reported by parent	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.016	0.126
Learning disability in 8th grade, as reported by parent	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.056	0.230
Academic performance & confidence			
R attends a public high school	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.744	0.437
10th-grade Score on reading standardized test (BYTXRSTD)	–50 to 50	2.674	9.439
10th-grade Score on math standardized test (BYTXMSTD)	–50 to 50	2.737	9.594
10th-grade math self-confidence score (BYMATHSE)	–2 to 2	0.096	1.016
10th-grade English self-confidence score (BYENGLSE)	–2 to 2	0.060	0.999
High School Grade Point Average (GPA)	0 to 4 scale	2.913	0.710
Social isolation			
“In class I often feel ‘put down’ by other students”	1 = strongly disagree [SD] to 4 = strongly agree [SA]	1.910	0.693
R has less than three “close friends”	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.052	0.222
Intergroup contact measures			
Type of community where high school is located			
R's High school is in an urban area	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.289	0.454
R's High school is in a rural area	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.206	0.404
R's High school is in a suburban area	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.505	0.500
Diversity and racial tension in high school			
Percent non-white students in R's high school, as reported by school administrator	0% to 100%	25.561	26.901
Percent ELL students in R's high school, as reported by school administrator	0% to 100%	3.110	7.443
Percent of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch, as reported by school administrator	0% to 100%	18.999	21.859
There is racial tension between students of different racial groups, reported by school admin	1 = SD to 4 = SA	1.689	0.528
Diversity of social groups			
At least one of R's 3 closest friends is of a different race than R	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.342	0.474
“Students make friends with students of other racial and ethnic groups”	1 = SD to 4 = SA	3.198	0.648
Community service			
How often does R perform community service in 10th grade?	1 = rarely to 4 = almost daily	1.495	0.748
Education enlightens measures			
Course-taking in inequality-related subject throughout high school			
Units in Ethnic and Area studies	# of units (1 h/wk for a semester = 1 unit)	0.234	0.569
Units in Legal Studies	# of units	0.046	0.188
Units in Philosophy and Religion	# of units	0.690	1.392
Units in Psychology	# of units	0.195	0.364
Units in Social Studies (including history and non-psychology social sciences)	# of units	3.551	1.053
Extracurricular activities			
R participates in sports in 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.482	0.500
R participates in band in 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.213	0.410
R participates in theater in 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.139	0.346
R participates in yearbook club in 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.186	0.389
R participates in student government in 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.148	0.356
R participates in service clubs 10th grade	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.224	0.417
Ideological buttressing measures			
Traditional family arrangement			
R lives with single mother or female guardian	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.159	0.366
R lives with single father or male guardian	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.030	0.170
R lives with two parents/guardians	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.811	0.463
Parents' labor market position			
Parents' highest level of education	1 = < H.S. to 6 = grad degree	4.819	2.019

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