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## Rich man, poor man: Developmental differences in attributions and perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

In an examination guided by cognitive developmental and attribution theory of how explanations of wealth and poverty and perceptions of rich and poor people change with age and are interrelated, 6-, 10-, and 14-year-olds ( $N = 88$ ) were asked for their causal attributions and trait judgments concerning a rich man and a poor man. First graders, like older children, perceived the rich man as more competent than the poor man. However, they had difficulty in explaining wealth and poverty, especially poverty, and their trait perceptions were associated primarily with their attributions of wealth to job status, education, and luck. Fifth and ninth graders more clearly attributed wealth and poverty to the equity factors of ability and effort and based their trait perceptions on these attributions. Although the use of structured attribution questions revealed more understanding among young children than previous studies have suggested, the findings suggest a shift with age in the underlying bases for differential evaluation of rich and poor people from a focus on good outcomes associated with wealth (a good education and job) to a focus on personal qualities responsible for wealth (ability and effort).

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### Introduction

To understand and function within their society, children must come to understand the origins, nature, and implications of a variety of human differences, including differences in socioeconomic status (SES). Their emerging understandings and perceptions of wealth and poverty are likely to have important implications for their views of individuals they encounter as well as their opinions on policy

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issues related to taxation of the rich, safety net programs such as welfare and unemployment benefits, and “class warfare.” What do children of different ages think causes wealth or poverty, how do they evaluate rich and poor people, and how do their causal attributions inform their evaluations? The current study addressed these questions, examining issues left unresolved in an older literature on conceptions of income inequality and exploring the implications of a newer line of research on perceptions of people who experience good or bad fortune for understanding perceptions of rich and poor people.

Previous research on the topic, largely conducted during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, suggests that awareness of visible cues to SES emerges early in childhood, as early as the preschool years. For example, Ramsey (1991) asked 3- to 5-year-olds about pictures of adults and children of different social classes and found that most children had some understanding of the terms *rich* and *poor* and could classify people as rich or poor. However, they could not explain why some people have more money than others. Nor can 6-year-olds, although many appreciate that there is a connection between wealth and work (Enesco & Navarro, 2003).

By around 10 or 11 years of age, children are more able to explain income inequality and begin to adopt an equity perspective claiming that rich and poor people differ in wealth because they differ in psychological characteristics such as ability and motivation or effort (Enesco & Navarro, 2003; Leahy, 1983; Ramsey, 1991). Leahy’s seminal study (Leahy, 1981; Leahy, 1983) of children ages 6 to 17 documented in 6-year-olds an emphasis on possessions and other observables in differentiating rich and poor people and many “don’t know” or definitional explanations of wealth and poverty (e.g., the rich are rich because they have money). By 11 years of age, there was greater emphasis on psychological traits and equity considerations, with children explaining wealth and poverty on the basis of job status, intelligence, education, and effort. Consistent with other evidence that adolescents become aware of the larger social system in which people of different social classes exist (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Enesco & Navarro, 2003), Leahy’s 14- and 17-year-olds displayed a sense of the tension between social classes. They also attributed poverty more to lack of education and effort and understood more fully that wealth is related not just to having a job but also to having a good one. As they solidified their equity theory of wealth, they increasingly justified economic inequality.

Similarly, American adults’ views of wealth and poverty are guided primarily by an ideology of individualism, holding that an individual’s talents and efforts are the main determinants of his or her success in life. Individualistic explanations dominate structural explanations citing factors such as the quality of schools and the availability of jobs as well as fatalistic explanations emphasizing good or bad luck and other uncontrollable factors (Feagin, 1972, 1975; Hunt, 2004; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). However, this individualistic view is more dominant in explanations of wealth than in explanations of poverty, where structural barriers to upward mobility are also cited and subgroups of the poor (e.g., the deserving or working poor vs. the welfare-dependent poor) are distinguished (Hunt, 2004; Robinson, 2009). Emphasis on structural or societal causes of poverty varies across social groups, being stronger among political liberals, minorities, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than among political conservatives, Whites, and wealthier adults (Hunt, 2004; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Overall, then, children not only develop more sophisticated understandings of the causes of wealth and poverty with age, consistent with the cognitive developmental perspective that has dominated research in this area, but also are socialized into the particular beliefs about income inequality that dominate in their social group, consistent with a socialization or social representation perspective (e.g., see Berti & Bombi, 1988; Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Enesco & Navarro, 2003).

As children in our society come to understand that people are rich or poor primarily because of their own talents and efforts, do they also come to view rich people more positively than poor people? Baldus and Tribe (1978) studied children in Grades 1, 3, and 6 and concluded that children begin to impute more desirable traits to rich people than to poor people in third grade, around the time when children offer ability and effort explanations of wealth and poverty, and that this stereotyping then strengthens with age (see also Karniol, 1985; Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2005). Although adolescents continue to view rich people more positively than poor people overall, they display more nuanced or differentiated trait perceptions. For example, Woods et al. (2005) found that whereas fourth graders viewed rich peers as more capable than poor peers in a variety of areas, sixth and eighth graders thought that poor students might do worse in academics but better in sports and similarly in

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