Economic Status: Middle Class and Poor Children’s Views

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This qualitative study explored low and middle-income children’s character associations regarding economic class and their corresponding friendship choices. Projective techniques employing photographs of houses representing different income level families were used to interview 48 United States children between the ages of five and 14 years, divided equally between low and middle income. It is clear that even at early ages, both realistic assessments and popular prejudices about wealth and poverty were firmly fixed in their minds. Their prejudgments likely prevent them from reaching across economic boundaries on the basis of inherent factors of common interest and friendship. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Children’s understanding of their relative economic position is at present generally unknown, having not been studied in any systemic fashion. Yet children are being raised in rich industrial countries that exhibit widening differences in income. In Britain income inequality began to grow in the late 1970s and had eventually increased more than in almost any other developed country by 1985 (Wilkinson, 1996). Indeed, the current disparity between the highest and lowest earners ‘is greater than at any time since 1886’ (Glyn and Miliband, 1994). In the United Kingdom the income earned by the top 25 per cent of the population is nearly equivalent to the earnings of the bottom 75 per cent (Glyn and Miliband, 1994). This inequality is even more pronounced in the United States (US), where in the last 25 years the richest 10 per cent of the population has come to own 68 per cent of the country’s wealth, as the middle-class contracts, the ranks of the poor swell, and the extent of poverty deepens (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1995; Jones, 1995; Sklar, 1995).

Though gross income inequality exists and continues to heighten in many industrialised nations, not enough is known about how children who grow up in non-egalitarian societies view themselves and each other. This study examines how low-income and middle-class children in the US understand the meaning of their relative socioeconomic circumstances. These children are growing up in the advanced industrial nation with the widest differential between the richest and poorest children.
(Bradsher, 1995). England and other countries moving toward greater income polarisation may take heed from the perceptions of these children.

**Background**

In addition to those who suffer from the material deprivations of poverty, there are many more in wealthy societies who may have achieved basic minimal standards of living but still experience the damage of relative poverty (Wilkinson, 1996). Children living in relative poverty are those who live in households having incomes below 50 per cent of average income (Wilkinson, 1994a). Relative poverty is greater when more of a country’s income amasses among the 10 per cent highest earners and most citizens have income further below these salaries (Wilkinson, 1996).

This divergent income spread impacts the health and well-being of citizens, especially those in relative poverty (Phillimore, Beattie, and Townsend, 1994; Wilkinson, 1994b). In England, where the vast majority of the population have the essentials to survive, those who endure relative poverty find their health more impacted by how their circumstances compare to those of others than by the actual material realities of their circumstances (Lundberg, 1991; Wilkinson, 1994a). The ever-widening income disparity in Britain since 1985 has contributed to differences in mortality rates between rich and poor; lower educational standards for the poor and a greater proportion of children exhibiting lower reading ability; an increase in child abuse; more behavioural disturbances and school expulsions; and a surge in depression, suicide, prostitution, drug use, and drug dealing (Hagan, 1994; Wilkinson, 1994a).

Income inequality fractionalises and polarises a society, tearing at social cohesion and community spirit (Wilkinson, 1996). It sets up a social hierarchy that disparages those who are relatively poor, increasing their stress and social exclusion. As income inequality intensifies the society becomes more divided, preoccupied with status and prejudice and excluding subgroups who grow more isolated, estranged, alienated, and resentful toward the mainstream (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 10).

Though it appears that persons learn to rank themselves and others as ‘better than’ and ‘less than’ in interpersonal relationships based on affluence, there are only a few experimental studies investigating children’s perceptions of economic class or income inequality. For example, Leahy (1983) found that American teens, regardless of race or class, believed that unequal distribution of wealth was justified based on individual differences in education, intelligence, work, and effort. Though all respondent groups in this study tended to uphold the legitimacy of income inequality, upper-class children were more likely to attribute poverty to individual causation, and along with white middle-class children were more convinced that economic stratification was a natural, immutable fact of life. Similarly Emler and Dickinson (1985) discovered that the British latency-age children they interviewed favoured differential pay for working- and middle-class jobs. However, the middle-class children offered a greater variety and number of rationales to justify this difference. Both working-class and middle-class Scottish teens (Dickinson, 1990) similarly ranked various jobs according to income and accepted this system of inequality as fair and natural. Nevertheless, the middle-class children more staunchly favoured this inequality and more often justified it on the basis of greater individual education and expertise.
Although these few studies tend to show that children, and especially middle- and upper-class children, accept income inequalities, more studies are needed to understand how children perceive themselves and each other in this unequal playing field. The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn how low- and middle-income children in the US spontaneously express their attitudes regarding economic status and to understand how their economic comparisons relate to their friendship choices.

**Methodology**

*Participants*

The sample of 48 participants consisted of 24 middle-class children and 24 poor children residing in a US Midwestern twin city area (population 125,000). Both groups were fairly equally distributed across the age range of five to 14 years.

The middle-income respondents lived in a census tract in which the average household income was $54,548 (US Census). Although there is no generally agreed upon definition of middle class, this average income falls well within middle-income range according to criteria set by several researchers (Danziger, Gottschalk and Smolensky, 1989; Strobel, 1993). The low-income respondents all met low-income eligibility requirements to receive service from a federally-funded school-based health centre.

The low-income students were equally divided between Caucasian and African-Americans. The middle-class students were 92 per cent Caucasian and eight per cent African-American, mirroring the actual majority/minority population distribution of their school. Twenty-one (88 per cent middle-class children and eight (33 per cent) low-income children lived in two-parent households.

*Sample procedures*

The study of low-income children was conducted first. To prevent a bias of inclusion of children with health concerns, personnel of the school-based health centre approached both parents of children who currently were using their centre's services and parents of children who were eligible based on financial need but were presently not using such services. As a result of the trusting relationships established between health centre personnel and parents, all the parents who were approached gave permission for their child to participate.

Middle-class children were recruited via letters sent by two principals, one in an elementary school and another in a middle school, within the same district. They systematically chose every third or seventh child from a student list until the sample requirements of sex and age distribution were achieved. Seventy-five per cent of the parents returned a signed consent form.

*Interviews*

The author began the interviews, which ranged in length from 25 to 40 minutes, by explaining the research process and purpose, asking for respondents' assent, and making it
clear that they could choose to stop the interview at any time. All but two of the children assented.

The children were shown two 9 inches × 11 inches photographs: one of a rundown home and another of a suburban-style ranch house with a well-manicured lawn. A local property agent suggested that the first house would list below 20,000 dollars and judged that the second house would sell within the $90,000–110,000 range and be affordable to buyers earning $40,000–50,000 annually. The middle-class children were also shown a third picture, this one of an impressive mansion on a sprawling lot that another local agent judged to be worth nearly a half-million dollars. Use of these photographs allowed children to express their ideas and feelings unencumbered by the usual parameters of academic conventions. Rather than asking them questions in which they were the focus, attention was placed on the imagined children/families living in these homes, permitting the interview subjects to be more open and expressive. In addition, the use of photographs was designed to avoid prejudice that might be elicited by direct questions about ‘poor’, ‘middle-class’, or ‘rich’ people. These words may have connotations that the actual reality of poor and middle-class living does not.

Questions examined the character judgments that children may make based on their perceptions of people’s economic class status and how they perceive such status as influencing their friendships. The researcher showed the respondents each picture and asked the following standard questions.

1. Tell me about the people who live in this house.
2. What are the grown-ups like who live in this house?
3. What are the children like?
4. Which child would you choose as your friend?

Verbatim transcriptions of the audiotaped interviews were analysed question by question across interviews for dominant themes within each of the two respondent groups. Emergent themes from each group were compared to reveal similarities and differences. These themes are the focus of this article, and to illustrate them the children’s sentiments, attitudes and/or experiences have been quoted extensively.

**Findings**

These findings first describe respondents’ associations with middle- and low-income class position, and then delineate how economic class status might impact the respondents’ own choices of friends. For simplification the terms MCCRs will be used to refer to *middle-class child respondents* and PCRs to denote *poor child respondents*.

**The imagined lower class**

When the children were asked, ‘Can you tell me about the people who live in this house’, more low-income than middle-income respondents (17, 71 per cent versus 11, 46 per cent) described the imagined poor in favourable or at least neutral terms—by associating positive attributes with the poor, expressing caring feelings towards them, or describing their poverty. Furthermore, the nuanced nature of the comments differed between the two respondent groups.
The MCCRs who described the imagined poor family in positive terms usually labelled the family as generically ‘nice’ without detailing any specific positive qualities. Their responses generally were brief and were often stated from what seemed to be an outsider’s perspective. The PCRs’ responses conveyed a closer connection to the imagined poor family. They were generally more descriptive in their comments, explaining the poor family’s predicament, perspective, and feelings, seeming to emphasise their humanity more.

**Financial hardships.** Such differing responses were apparent in the way PCRs and MCCRs described the family’s conditions of poverty. In addition to simply labelling the family as poor, many more PCRs than MCCRs (19, 79 per cent PCRs; 5, 21 per cent MCCRs) mentioned the *difficult plight* of the poor. Furthermore, the PCRs often described these hardships in greater detail. The MCCRs, for example, said that the people ‘don’t have much money to afford a new house’, ‘don’t get that much stuff from their parents’, ‘don’t have a lot of toys to play with’, ‘might not work in very good jobs’, and are ‘hungry and bored’. While these children did not dismiss the difficulties that poverty engenders, they apparently were not able to describe its impact more fully. In contrast the PCRs, who have experienced the exigencies and hardships of poverty, were able to articulate in specific, explicit language what it means to be poor in the US. Their depictions suggested that poverty creates havoc and deprivation in the lives of the imagined poor family, leaving them with urgent and unmet needs.

They might not have a lot of food because they got to pay for the house payments and stuff …They’re probably worried a lot about how they can … buy their kids clothes. They need help, they need money, they need paint, maybe a job. If we could get them a new house. They might need food and care … Somebody to love them.

Probably don’t have enough money to buy soap and things, they’d probably be dirty. They’d be sad because they aren’t able to buy food and have to find it themselves (at food pantries).

Perhaps because their empathy enabled them to imagine the pain more, (25 per cent) six PCRs and (4 per cent) one MCCR spontaneously expressed the wish to help the imagined poor family.

**Social rejection.** Social rejection emerged as a theme in both respondent groups (6, 25 per cent PCRs; 4, 17 per cent MCCRs), indicating their awareness of the hostile social consequences of being poor. Here again there are nuanced differences between the viewpoints of the MCCRs and PCRs. The MCCRs assumed an external contextual view, emphasising the frequent rejections confronting the poor, rather than the poor children’s inner experiences. They expected the children to be ostracised by their non-poor schoolmates:

‘Cause people might tease them about not having a lot of money or they can’t afford things, like everything that they want …They’d be like kind of quiet around school ’cause they wouldn’t want people to know if they were poor.

Probably don’t have a lot of friends … Maybe like people like them by what they have or where they live. (e.g. Maybe they’d have some friends among the poor).

The PCRs envisioned up-close the imagined poor children’s sensitivity to rejection. They poignantly communicated the emotional pain inflicted by social ostracism:

If they’re not rich or if their clothes are messed up, most, some people laugh about them. I try to be their friend … (because) they feel like dying because they’re poor.
They’re probably sad because some people are making fun of them … They probably don’t have many friends to play with except for bothers and sisters and if they try to make friends the other people will make fun of their clothes and how they look … I’d try to help them out if they being teased. I’ll tell the other people to stop teasing them.

While middle-class respondents also understand that poverty is an isolating condition, the low-income respondents were often more able to focus on the emotional consequences of this isolation.

Distinct advantages. In the PCR group themes emerged which conveyed the positive qualities of the imagined poor family. Overwhelmingly it was the PCRs who connected empathy, family cohesion, and industriousness to lower economic status. Perhaps many low-income children recognise that being poor does not exclusively define these individuals’ essence and are more able to view their rich humanity. Positive themes that emerged among the PCRs included closeness within the family (8, 33 per cent): ‘if you’re poor you’re really rich because you have a family that really loves you’. These children explained that the parents are ‘hardworking’ people who try ‘to support their children’ and ‘keep their children safe’ and who ‘worry a lot about how they can make (it so that) their kids go to college’. These comments also suggest that they witness at an early age that even if parents work hard, they may not be able to protect and support their children. Poor children who witness people who are working hard and yet not getting rewarded may well be likely to have a more profound, complicated understanding of the consequences of poverty.

Strong coping skills and helpfulness to others were two other positive subcategories among the PCRs. Coping abilities (5, 21 per cent) included staying friendly in spite of being shunned, feeling proud of what you do have, and reaching out to others for help. For a few (4, 16 per cent), a glance at the impoverished house elicited the supposition that the people within would be helpful to others: ‘They are nice to people and people give them money and they help somebody else out’.

Not only were themes concerning specific positive characteristics absent in the MCCCR group, but twice as many middle-income respondents as low-income respondents (12, 50 per cent MCCRs and 6, 25 per cent PCRs) attached negative characteristics to the imagined poor family. These included being ‘dirty’, ‘lazy’, ‘mean’, and engaging in destructive behaviours such as ‘busting windows’. While angry, withdrawn, and acting-out behaviours were attributed to the poor by a segment of both respondent groups, judgments such as ‘they’re not as good as you’, ‘not responsible’, ‘loose parenting’ and ‘not really thankful for the stuff they have’ were exclusive to a few MCCRs. These latter judgments imply that the poor are careless, need to try harder to gain acceptance, or are to blame for their poverty. Some respondents from both groups bought into negative stereotypes of the poor and suggested that these personal characteristics are not the result of the despair and anger of living in poverty but rather caused the poverty. Fewer PCRs than MCCRs expressed such stereotypes perhaps because their experience of the disadvantages of poverty and their personal relationships among the poor have informed them otherwise.

Furthermore, some MCCRs (7, 29 per cent) expressed ambivalence toward the poor family. For example, one child who said that ‘it doesn’t matter to me what they live in and stuff just as long as they’re nice’ also associated the family with possibly being ‘like drug dealers or something’. Another child who eloquently asserted, ‘Just ‘cause their house is run down
doesn’t mean their personalities are, so they might be really nice people’, explained that children in the house would be shy, jealous, and envious of other children. A respondent who stated that ‘There’s nothing wrong with having a poor house’ immediately followed with the supposition that ‘They’re not very responsible’. It appears that some children may cherish the ideal of equality and yet have also internalised negative messages about the poor, resulting in confused and contradictory thinking.

The imagined middle class

**MCCRs view imagined middle class.** The MCCRs (20, 83 per cent) overwhelmingly approved of the ‘regular’, ‘normal’, ‘average’, imagined middle-class family who was ‘nice’, ‘happy’, and ‘friendly’. Here are examples of typical comments emphasising the normality of residents of the middle-income home:

-Probably regular, friendly. Those parents probably have a job. The kids probably go to school. They’re probably pretty nice, they’re nice people. The kids probably don’t get into much trouble like around the neighborhood or at school. Maybe at home the kids get in trouble. But I guess overall pretty nice and pretty happy with what they have.

-They’re probably nice and their kids are not like rich and spoiled, and they’re not like poor and they probably get like nice presents for Christmas and everything . . . Cause you might get some things that you want ‘cause like you don’t get everything you want and you don’t get nothing.

A quarter (6) of the MCCRs additionally emphasised that unlike the poor, the imagined middle-class family/child would be more responsible, and have more appropriate rules, chores, and discipline:

-They probably have some rules . . . instead of like in the first (poor) house, they probably don’t have set chores, they just like do this whenever.

-Maybe a bit more responsible about their children’s actions and might get a little bit harder punishments . . . (Kids would be) probably nice to each other, or working hard with each other. And they probably help each other on homework.

These children, though expressing an idealised view of the middle class, are providing many explanations for why the middle-class children are that way. There is balance in their lives, they don’t have too much or too little, and they fit in as part of a large normative group. In all matters—Christmas presents, chores, cleanliness—they are moderate and above all normal, mainstream, and acceptable.

**PCRs view imagined middle class.** Over half the PCRs (14, 58 per cent) also attributed positive or at least neutral characteristics to the middle class. Of these (13, 54 per cent) noted their financial good fortune: ‘They can cook. They can feed their children. They can play and they can eat’. ‘They don’t have to ask people for money, they can just get it and they can buy anything they want for their children’. Sometimes the PCRs’ attributions of the imagined middle-class family appeared to represent what they themselves were missing.

Positive comments about the children’s personal traits also abounded, with cleanliness and good manners (9, 38 per cent) frequently expressed virtues:

-They’re clean and they’re not mean, and they keep their house clean. And when it’s dirty they clean it up. And if a window broke they’ll buy a new window. And all their kids are nice and they teach them good things.
They show their kid how to clean, how to clean up the house and they work on their house a lot and make sure it’s always clean.

The imagined middle-class parents were praised (5, 21 per cent) for attending to, teaching, and respecting their children. ‘I think they’ll really be nice parents . . .They can talk with their kids and (tell them) how good they are doing’.

These PCRs regarded the family members as people who follow the rules (4, 17 per cent) and behave in a manner above reproach, perhaps as a consequence of good parenting. ‘They’re like good friends, good people to hang around with. They don’t get in trouble, they like to do fun things like go play basketball or something’. ‘They probably go to school every day unless they’re really sick . . . and maybe say a prayer . . . and dress up good’.

These low-income child respondents expressed amazingly positive images of the middle class, specifically their good hygiene, sensitive parenting, and conformity to rules. They communicate these stereotypical judgments in concrete terms of what middle class people do, and sometimes in what might be a self-denigrating comparison to the presumed deficiencies of low-income people.

Not all PCRs, however, held these highly positive images. For example, four (16 per cent) PCRs imagined that the middle-class family could be ‘nice’ and ‘cool’, but could also be ‘mean’, ‘snobby’, ‘rude’, or ‘bullying’. Their veneer of friendliness and welcome might not be dependable:

Some of them might be rude and some of them might be nice. And the nice ones might not let you even come in their house cause you never know, their mom might be rude cause she’s saying, our house is nice and we don’t need nobody to mess it up.

Additionally, six (25 per cent) PCRs were unabashedly negative in their views of the imagined middle-class residents, considering them callous and indifferent to the plight of the poor. ‘They really don’t like sharing their money or anything else with anybody else’. ‘They are richly happy while poor people are living in the snow’.

Furthermore, they judged them as feeling superior and wielding their privileged position to disparage and discount those with less power. ‘If you’re trying to make friends, they don’t want to be your friend because you look nasty and don’t look like them’. ‘Think that they got the beautiful house so that they can do anything to people—just bully people around because they live in a nice house’.

In summary, poor children positively stereotype the middle class, sometimes idealising their lives to a greater extent than even middle-class children do. Yet there is an undercurrent of resentment, attributing to the middle class strong class prejudice against the poor.

Choice of friends

The last question asked respondents which imagined child in the house pictures they would prefer to have as their own friend. The PCRs selected between the imagined poor and imagined middle-class child. The MCCRs, who were shown three house pictures, could also elect to befriend an imagined rich child. Over half (13, 54 per cent) of the respondents in each group selected the imagined child in their own economic class.
MCCR’S friendship choices. The MCCRs predominantly explained their choice as ‘Cuz they’re like me’, ‘has the same things and the same likes and dislikes’, ‘able to relate’, and the desire to be with someone ‘normal’. A MCCR explains just how circumscribed by economic class the choice of friendships is:

Well, rich people might hang out with rich people and normal (middle-class) with the normal, like poor people might hang out with the poor people so you could just feel the same, like I don’t have more than you or less than you.

Material possessions so define an individual that they are the major determinant of being on a comfortable, connected, equal level with another person.

The MCCRs’ choices were often reinforced by reasons they wouldn’t choose the imagined poor or rich child as a friend. The poor might have off-putting behaviours, such as tending to ‘think about money a lot’, ‘be dirty and he might hang around us and say stuff’, ‘follow you around, and like just depend on (you). You want to have a life outside of them and they just won’t let you’. The poor might be too unfamiliar or uncomfortable to be around, as one MCCR, who held his own feelings responsible, admitted ‘I’d just feel weird being around that person because I have so much’. Another MCCR also expressed the foreign feeling she’d have in meeting a poor child:

I haven’t met a family that lives poor like that. I’d be kind of nervous ‘cause you don’t know how to react to them, ‘cause you don’t know if they’re gonna be, like I don’t know, like really really nice and you don’t know how to react to that.

The wealthy child also was an alien choice because s/he would ‘think that they’re so much better than other people because they’ve got more money’.

Only three (13 per cent) MCCRs selected the poor child ‘because I’m sorry for them’ and to ‘make her happier to play with someone who has to know what it is to have money and buy toys’. One of these three who selected the poor child because ‘nobody really likes her’ blamed the child for her marginalisation, ‘She doesn’t really know how to act with people. She’s not really smart’.

Four MCCRs (17 per cent) wanted to befriend the wealthy child ‘to see all her money’ or ‘because he might have a lot of toys to play with’.

PCRs’ friendship choices. Some poor children based their tendency to choose a friend within their socioeconomic class on a desire to help (six, 25 per cent) the other child and on a quest for sincere friendship (six, 25 per cent). Their attraction toward a poor child was often coupled by their expectation that their offer of friendship outside of their own class would meet with rejection:

So I can help them have a better life. And sometimes I might choose a rich kid because some of them don’t think they’re all ‘bad’ (e.g. great). So I might choose a rich person, but I mostly would choose a poor person and try to help them.

Because I really don’t want a rich friend that thinks he’s better than me. When we’re friends we know that we’re friends because we like each other, and not that we just want each other for money and stuff.

This kid (poor) would probably treat me nice and this kid (middle-class) would probably treat me badly because she’s rich and she wants a lot of friends who are rich.
The imagined middle-class child, however, was the choice of eight (33 per cent) of the PCRs who either expected this child to be a better person (‘they listen to their parents’, ‘always clean up the house’, ‘knows not to hit too much’) or who anticipated sharing in the friend’s resources (‘maybe he’d give me his money’).

Only four (17 per cent) MCCRs and three (13 per cent) PCRs were the exceptions who insisted that they’d have to ‘know the person first’ before choosing a friend because ‘It depends on their attitude and how they act towards people’. For the most part income level was so closely tied to personal characteristics in the minds of these children that selection was quick, decisive, and readily justified. The middle-class children selected their imagined counterparts in order to feel the same, comfortable, and normal. The poor children choose to befriend within their own class in order to offer help; have sincere, trustworthy friendships; and avoid rejection. Opportunities for easy interaction, real connection, and mutual concern across economic boundaries are not regarded by these children as a likely possibility.

Summary and discussion

Clearly the PCRs in this study were more able than the MCCRs to identify with the poor. MCCRs often tended to feel more distant to and less empathic with the experience of poverty. Their responses most frequently reflected a view of the poor from their own socioeconomic perspective, rather than from the felt experience of the imagined poor. Though they knew that conditions of poverty were undesirable, they often did not focus on the hardships confronting the poor and apparently could not imagine their complex struggles. They had some insights into the reality of economic class prejudice but generally could not identify with the damage that results from being ostracised as a poor child. While repeatedly describing the poor as generically ‘nice’, middle-class children had difficulty stating any specific positive characteristics. Indeed, half made negative stereotypical judgments about the poor.

Depersonalisation of the poor appears to be a process that begins for middle-class children at very young ages. Without feelings of empathy toward the poor, their minimalisation of poverty’s consequences is even more disturbing. Middle-class children who cannot appreciate the real hardships of a life in poverty may think that it is easy to get out of poverty, and hence blame the poor for their disadvantaged position. Such lack of understanding and information appears to be leading some to formulate their own criticism and to readily absorb the economic class prejudice of their society.

PCRs frequently identified and empathised with the poor, being more likely to recognise how persons in poverty are disadvantaged. Their common identification with the imagined poor showed in empathic responses filled with knowing detail about the social stigma, personal stresses, and hardships imbedded in a life of poverty. They tended to view the poor more positively, sometimes associating lower economic status with such attributes as familial closeness, strong coping abilities, and compassion. It appears that because of their personal experiences of being poor, many do not accept such societal stereotyping. However, not all poor children are immune from absorbing negative societal stereotypes or drawing their own self-defeating conclusions to explain why some people must live with so much less. This disparagement of their own economic class status was
also evidenced by some poor respondents who described the middle class in exceedingly positive terms, assuming that they had not only the financial means but also the positive character traits that the poor lacked.

Both respondent groups reflected the relative prestige of middle-income class status. MCCRs tended to idealise middle-class persons as conforming, self-satisfied, responsible, and the desired ‘regular’ family/children. The middle-class children who so overwhelmingly extolled the imagined middle-class family need to understand that systemic forces, not personal worth, largely determine economic class status. Such learning would enable them to make assessments of themselves and others that are more reality based and might permit them to recognise similarities with their peers who have fewer material comforts.

The majority of PCRs also approved of the imagined middle-class family, generally describing their financial good fortune as their best characteristic but also ascribing cleanliness, good manners, and rule-following to them. Indeed, a portion of PCRs stereotyped the middle class even more positively than did the MCCRs. Sometimes these idealisations also appeared to be expressions of diminished regard for themselves. It seems that these low-income respondents not only accepted positive societal messages about the middle class, but because they had no direct acquaintances with this population these images remained unrealistically positive. Messages that attach moral rectitude to financial advantage may speak loudly to some poor children about what they are not. In other instances PCRs expressed feelings of resentment toward middle-class persons, who they regarded as indifferent and cold-hearted toward the poor. These children can be validated for their astute awareness that the world can be hostile and uncaring about their situation. Left alone to struggle with the serious consequences of being poor, some of them choose to disrespect themselves and/or middle-class persons. Knowing more about the systemic causes for income variation and about the realities of the lives of their financially fortunate peers, would enable PCRs to more clearly see them too as clay-footed human beings and to develop empathy for those of different economic backgrounds.

When the students were asked to select the imagined child they would desire for a friend, their choices and rationales reflected a prevalent economic class consciousness. Middle-class respondents wanted another middle-class child who would be similar to themselves and did not find the poor attractive in any compelling way that would pull them away from their comfort zone of familiarity. The poor respondents often defensively selected friends within their own class because they wanted to avoid rejection or because they empathised and wanted to give support and concern where they were most needed. It appears that it would not occur to many middle-class children to befriend a poor child, and poor children would regard it as an impossibility to have a sincere friendship with a middle-class child. Children clearly described the social chasm which often deters them from reaching out to each other in friendship with a degree of comfort and trust.

While there was a general tendency to wish to befriend those of a similar socioeconomic status, the MCCRs who chose to befriend a poor child did so out of sympathy or even pity, while the PCRs who chose the middle-class child as a potential friend expressed the desire to become more like him or her. The respondents have already learned the realities of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and at very young ages have to negotiate with each other from unequal status positions—or choose not to at all because it is too painful or undesirable. The children are obviously bright and perceptive about social norms and have adapted to
the unspoken but gripping rules of power and prestige linked to relative income. These rules both distort and limit their interactions from a very young age.

**Conclusion**

This study cautions other industrialised nations who are headed, like the US, toward rising income disparities. These findings alert us to how early in life children internalise the divisions caused by intense income inequalities that undermine common bonds, familiar connections, and mutual understanding among people. Such societies may increasingly turn poor children against themselves and both poor and wealthier children against each other.

**References**


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