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South African children's views of wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the understanding of wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment in South African Black (African) children aged 7, 9, 11 and 14 drawn from a rural, an urban and a semi-urban setting. Two hundred and twenty-five children (80 rural, 60 urban and 85 semi-urban) were interviewed individually in Setswana, their mother tongue. The urban children were living in a township in Pretoria, the semi-urban and the rural in the North West Province. The results show that the particulars of the children's knowledge about wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment were influenced by their social environment. However, in line with previous studies, the results show that the children's capacity to make inferences and integrate information about these concepts is more influenced by age than by their social milieu. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Most of the growing body of research into economic socialisation has been based within the neo-Piagetian tradition and describes stages which children have to pass through in order to gain a full understanding of a specific economic concept. Researchers differ on the number of stages required to achieve a full understanding, but as Furnham (1996) in a recent review points out, the emerging trend in recent studies is to summarise them into three levels, these being (1) no understanding (2) understanding of some isolated concepts (3) linking of isolated concepts to full understanding.

This stage approach has been criticised on the grounds that it limits the process of economic socialisation to a purely cognitive developmental one without taking into account the effects of the social and cultural influences. However, as Roland-Lévy (1990) argues, alternative approaches are not mutually exclusive: the cognitive-developmental approach “stresses intra-individual differences as the child grows up while the environmental learning approach is more successful in describing inter-individual variations at the same age. Both theories assume that contacts with social reality are necessary for the building up of a predictable pattern of behaviour” (Roland-Lévy, 1990, p. 471). Hence the importance of the child’s social milieu as a determinant variable in cognitive development is not denied. The building of knowledge can therefore be seen as a socio-cognitive process, which relies significantly on the culture and circumstances in which the child lives. This does not mean that the child is a passive recipient of cultural values or norms, but that through direct experience and in communication with others in society, the child actively constructs his or her own knowledge of the world. In the words of Stacey (1982, p. 161): “The development of socio-economic understanding can be conceptualised as an active and continuous process in which the young person constructs and tests ideas, knowledge, theories and practices”.

The present study explores the linked concepts of wealth, inequality and unemployment held by South African Black (African) children. Previous studies of this domain have been particularly valuable as they have gone beyond simply giving stage descriptions of the development of economic concepts and provided evidence relevant to two models of socialisation. Thus functionalist models (e.g. Parsons, 1960), which would predict considerable uniformity among the classes as to the nature and explanation of the causes of wealth and inequality, have been partially supported by studies such as those by Connel (1979), who found no consistent class differences in

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