

Young children's ideas about the nature, causes, justification, and alleviation of poverty[☆]

Judith A. Chafel^{a,*}, Carin Neitzel^b

^a Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 3214 Education Building, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA

^b Department of Teaching and Learning, Vanderbilt University, USA

Abstract

Sixty-four 8-year-old boys and girls from urban and rural settings and representing different races and socioeconomic status backgrounds responded to questions about the nature, causes, justification, and alleviation of poverty. Much of what the children said indicated that they had not yet internalized prevailing adult norms and values about the poor in our society. A substantial proportion spoke in ways suggesting forces apart from the individual as causing poverty. Nearly all believed that poverty was not fair. Justifications offered by the children included disavowing economic inequality, or speaking in terms of basic needs or what should or ought to be. A majority mentioned philanthropy or societal change as a way to end poverty. Findings also lend support to the claim of social representations theory that concepts vary as a function of social factors. Future research should employ a design that acknowledges interacting variables to investigate systems of meaning in children's understandings about poverty.

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Ample evidence attests to the disparity between rich and poor in the United States (see, for example, [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2001](#); ["Rich Got Richer," 2002](#)). Government data substantiate that the after-tax income of Americans making up the middle of the income distribution increased modestly (10%) between 1979 and 1997, the top one percent of the population remarkably (157%), and those in the bottom quintile remained effectively unchanged (analyses completed by the Congressional Budget Office; reported by [The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2001](#)). More recent comprehensive data were not available at the time these figures were released, but preliminary analyses indicated that in 1998 and 1999 the trend toward rapid accumulation of wealth at the top of the income distribution persisted.

A proportion of all families with children in the United States (16.3%) subsist on income that positions them at the bottom of the income distribution below the poverty line (e.g., \$18,392 for a family of four) (2002 figures) ([United States Department of Health and Human Services, undated](#)). Although many interrelated complexities cause poverty (macroeconomic conditions, changing family structure, discrimination, defects of the capitalist system, and others) (see, for example, [Bianchi, 1993](#); [Featheringill, 1999](#); [Frazier, 1999](#)), popular thinking largely fails to take account of them.

In an article appearing in *American Psychologist*, [Lott \(2002\)](#) pointed to a substantial literature on this issue. Quoting [Halpern \(1993\)](#), she explained, "The tendency in the United States is to see poverty as an individual problem and to be

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 812 856 8136.

E-mail address: chafel@indiana.edu (J.A. Chafel).

preoccupied ‘with poor people’s behavior, rather than the social and economic arrangements that perpetuate poverty, inequality, and social exclusion’” (Lott, 2002, p. 102). Americans think of poverty as a life condition that is “inevitable, necessary, and just” (Chafel, 1997b, p. 434). The ideology has profound consequences for our society because it eclipses from public view social structural causes of poverty that require social reform (Blank, 1989; Chafel, 1997b; Feagin, 1975; Hendrickson & Axelson, 1985; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Ryan, 1984) (cited by Chafel, 1997a).

By comparison with those of adults, the beliefs of American children about the poor have scarcely been studied. A limited and largely dated literature indicates that preschool children distinguish between socioeconomic status groups in our society. Understandings of rich and poor become more detailed, differentiated, and developmentally advanced with age (Emler & Dickinson, 1993; Leahy, 1981, 1983a; Ramsey, 1991). With age, children become less sympathetic toward the economically disadvantaged. They are more accepting of “extremes in economic inequality as natural in society” (Stacey, 1987, p. 22). They increasingly explain inequality in terms of personal factors (Furby, 1979; Leahy, 1983a, 1983b, 1990), and speak of its inevitability and justice (Chafel, 1997a, 1997b; Leahy, 1990). In other words, children’s beliefs about the causes and justification of inequality conform with increasing age to societal ideology (Chafel, 1997b). The alteration in children’s thinking becomes evident during the second decade of life (Stacey, 1987). Inasmuch as “the socialization process is *intended* . . . to foster acceptance of the existing social order and of its values” (Furnham & Stacey, 1991, p. 7), the trend is not surprising.

Though not surprising, the trend does warrant taking a closer look at children before they reach the age of 10 to ascertain how they may think differently than adults. The present study analyzed the ideas of 8-year-old children about the nature, causes, justification, and alleviation of poverty. These themes were selected for analysis because they figure prominently in adult discourse about the poor. A number of hypotheses guided the study: namely, that there would be differences by gender, race, setting, and socioeconomic status in children’s thinking.

Social representations theory supports the hypotheses (Emler, 1987; Emler & Dickinson, 1993; Emler & Ohana, 1993; Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990). Social representations may be defined as “cognitive entities” about the social world: “what people think,” “beliefs and forms of understanding,” “interpretations and judgments” (Emler, 1987, p. 371). They are socially constructed, communicated, and shared. Children do not acquire them passively, as targets of the socialization process, but actively through negotiation (talking, interacting) with others. As Emler (1987, p. 380) explained, “Children . . . acquire or advocate particular concepts . . . only because and insofar as these are currently employed and acknowledged ways of thinking and talking within the social system to which these children belong.” The theory proposes that concept formation is a social process, and that concepts vary as a function of social factors.

Limited data on children’s ideas about social and economic inequality are consistent with the theory’s assumption about the social origins of knowledge. For example, girls seem to be more cognizant of personal conditions and cues of “rich” and “poor” than boys (Bombi, 1995/1998; Ramsey, 1991). In Leahy’s (1983a) study, white children were more fatalistic in their justification of wealth than black children, upper-middle-class children provided more equity explanations of poverty than other groups, and fewer white children than black children spoke about social structural change. Relatively few such effects appeared in the data, although the differences just noted do suggest that children’s ideas may be affected by race and class. Simmons and Rosenberg (1971) similarly found some variation by race and class in children’s perceptions of the stratification system. In that study, for example, black working-class children of secondary school age were less class conscious than white middle-class children of secondary school age. Yet, no differences emerged across groups in the children’s awareness of occupational prestige differences. Children of both groups expressed optimism about their life chances, but the more privileged were more optimistic of high success than the less privileged. The extent to which and in what ways sociodemographic factors influence children’s conceptions of inequality is not entirely clear from these or other studies conducted with American children.

Although differences were expected based on gender, socioeconomic status, race, and setting, specific predictions were not advanced. First, the inquiry focused on a relatively unexplored age group. Secondly, past studies have sought to analyze the correlates of children’s thinking about inequality, but conflicting findings have appeared for the effects of gender and socioeconomic status (see, for example, Chafel, 1995; Flanagan, Ingram, Gallay, & Gallay, 1997; Leahy, 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1990; Ramsey, 1991; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1971; Stendler, 1949; Tudor, 1971), and few studies report results for race or setting. Thirdly, analyses were completed using grounded categories that were inductively (not deductively) derived, and that portrayed understandings solely from the child’s perspective. With inductively derived categories, it’s difficult to anticipate a priori how children might respond. Preserving the child’s perspective was essential in a study that sought to analyze children’s thinking before adult notions were internalized. A decision was deliberately made not to employ a deductively derived coding scheme because the imposition of an adult framework

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