

## Children's representation of economic inequalities: The effects of social class

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Children aged 7 to 12 and drawn from contrasting social backgrounds made estimates of the incomes of people in different occupations and made judgements about the fairness of income differences. Middle-class children, as compared to working-class children, not only made higher overall estimates of income for all the occupations considered but also perceived a greater spread in incomes and a clearer division between manual and non-manual occupations. Irrespective of their own social class background, a majority of children regarded differences in income as justified on grounds of equity. However, the middle-class children appeared to possess a more extensive rationale for inequality and to be more committed to it. They also seemed more sensitive to other consequences of income differences. The results are discussed in terms of alternative theories of socio-cognitive development.

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To a greater or lesser extent, inequalities of wealth characterize all contemporary societies. This raises for the social scientist the question why and to what extent are these inequalities tolerated or accepted by the people they affect? Conflict theorists from Marx onwards have argued that those who are relatively disadvantaged by the economic *status quo* will be more likely to regard it as illegitimate (Dahrendorf, 1959). Functionalist theory, however, assumes that there is a widespread consensus among all groups in society about the justice and desirability of inequality, and that this consensus is generated through processes of socialization (Parsons, 1951).

Recently, developmental research has entered this debate (Stacey, 1982). This research has made two contributions. Firstly, it has generally supported the position advocated by functionalist theory, demonstrating that as they grow older children are increasingly likely to accept that inequalities in wealth are legitimate, a trend that does not appear to be affected appreciably by children's own relative positions in the socio-economic system (e.g. Connell, 1977; Leahy, 1983). Secondly, there appears to be a developmental trend towards preference for principles of distributive justice which support an unequal distribution of wealth in society (Hook & Cook, 1979): older children favour the allocation of wealth or resources according to considerations of equity. None the less, certain questions remain unanswered. Most research to date has been concerned with the explanations and justifications that children at different ages give for social and economic inequalities. Rather less attention has been given to children's beliefs about the nature of these inequalities or to the degree of consensus among children from different social backgrounds about the scale of such differences. The study reported here was concerned with these questions.

The aim of our research was to compare the income estimates for various occupations made by children with working-class and middle-class backgrounds respectively and to examine their judgements about the income distributions they perceived. The research was conceived within a theoretical framework provided by Moscovici's (1984) concept of social representation. In brief, Moscovici proposes a social-psychological theory of knowledge; he argues that knowledge is socially generated and sustained, that it will be an attribute of collectives rather than individuals, created and disseminated through processes of social influence and interaction. Moscovici further argues that there will be significant variations in the content of people's beliefs as a function of the groups to which they belong and the positions these occupy in society. This analysis contrasts with the cognitive-developmental

view of social knowledge as essentially an individual cognitive accomplishment and one to which specific social influences contribute nothing of substance (e.g. Turiel, 1983). According to this latter view, insofar as there are social class differences in children's beliefs about society, these will reflect differences in rates of development.

From the perspective of Moscovici's analysis, if social class does influence beliefs and judgements it will do so to the degree that different social classes constitute distinctive social environments, that is, to the degree that children in different social classes are immersed in quite dissimilar social worlds. The social class variable has been widely used in research with children but we suspect that the most commonly used index of class, parental occupation, may by itself fail to identify socially distinct groups. Thus, when children are divided into social classes in terms of their parents' occupations but attend the same schools there will be a considerable overlap in their social environments.

We argue that, for children, the class environment is likely to be composed of many interrelated elements among which are the parents and the home but also the area they live in, the schools they attend and the other adults and children they encounter. Given that the aim of our research was to study the effects of a clear contrast in social class background it was important to adopt a method of operationalizing social class that would achieve this contrast. We chose to do this in terms of the school each child attended, firstly, because school is potentially a central element of the class environment for children and, secondly, because if the schools are chosen appropriately they will be linked to other important factors contributing to the class environment such as area of residence, type of housing, parental occupation and parental income.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

Half of the sample was drawn from a state primary school in a lower working-class city area, a district in which all of the accommodation was local authority housing. The other half was drawn from a private, fee-paying school in the same city. In terms of the Registrar-General's five-point scale of socio-economic status, parents of children from the state school were almost entirely in social classes III and IV (skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations) whereas the parents of those from the private school were primarily in social class II (small businessmen, etc.). In other words, fathers of the state schoolchildren had traditional working-class jobs while those of the private schoolchildren had middle-class occupations.

Children were drawn from the third to the seventh level of the state primary school and from the equivalent years of the private school. In all, 123 children were interviewed, divided into approximately equal proportions between the two schools, between boys and girls, and between the five age levels. At the time of interviewing the average ages at each level were 7-59, 8-80, 9-90, 10-79 and 11-84 years respectively.

### *Procedure*

Children were interviewed individually by either a male or a female experimenter in a room set aside for the purpose in their school. No other children or school staff were present. Each child was first shown pictures of people representing four different occupations – doctor, teacher, bus driver and road sweeper. These occupations were chosen to meet two criteria. Firstly, they were intended to represent a spread of income in real terms; the first two were also typically 'white-collar' or middle-class jobs, and the latter two 'blue-collar' or working-class jobs. Secondly, they were chosen as occupations children in this age range would be likely to recognize and, in fact, these children had little difficulty in identifying them.

The interviewer first asked various questions about the pictures to familiarize the child with each of the occupations. The interviewer then asked, 'Suppose it is the end of the week and they are going to be paid, how much will each one get paid?' A stack of 'Monopoly' money in different denominations was provided; the denominations were 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100, with nine notes of each denomination. Indicating the range of denominations available and suggesting they could be interpreted as pound sterling values, the interviewer said, 'Let us pretend this is money they could be paid with; show me how much you think each one will get'. (Children were encouraged to distribute as much 'money' as they thought appropriate to each of the four pictures. The interviewer then checked the numerical totals with them and asked whether they were satisfied that this was definitely what each person would get at the end of the week. They were encouraged to make any adjustments they thought necessary and the interviewer then recorded the totals.

If different amounts had been awarded, the following questions were asked: 'Why does [...] get the most? Why does [...] get the least?' 'Is it fair that [...] gets more than the others? Why/why not?' If the same amount had

been awarded, the questions asked were: 'Should any of them get more than the others? Why/why not? Should any of them get less than the others? Why/why not?' All children were asked: 'Would it be better/is it better if they all get the same money? Why/why not?' The money was then removed and various other questions asked about the people depicted in the cards. Among these were the following: 'Which one has the nicest house? Why? Which one has the worst house? Why?'

## Results

### Pay estimates

The estimates of income can be examined in a number of ways. One is simply to consider the amount attributed to each occupation. As there were no significant differences in the amounts proposed by boys and girls, their estimates are combined in all the analyses. Table 1 gives the means for each occupation by age and social class. A  $2 \times 5 \times 4$  (class  $\times$  age  $\times$  occupation) ANOVA was computed with occupation as a within-subject variable. There was a significant between-subjects effect for class ( $F = 51.47$ , d.f. = 1,110,  $P < 0.0001$ ), but no effect for age ( $F = 0.64$ , d.f. = 4,110) and no interaction effect ( $F = 1.13$ , d.f. = 4,110).

**Table 1.** Income estimates<sup>a</sup> by age and social class

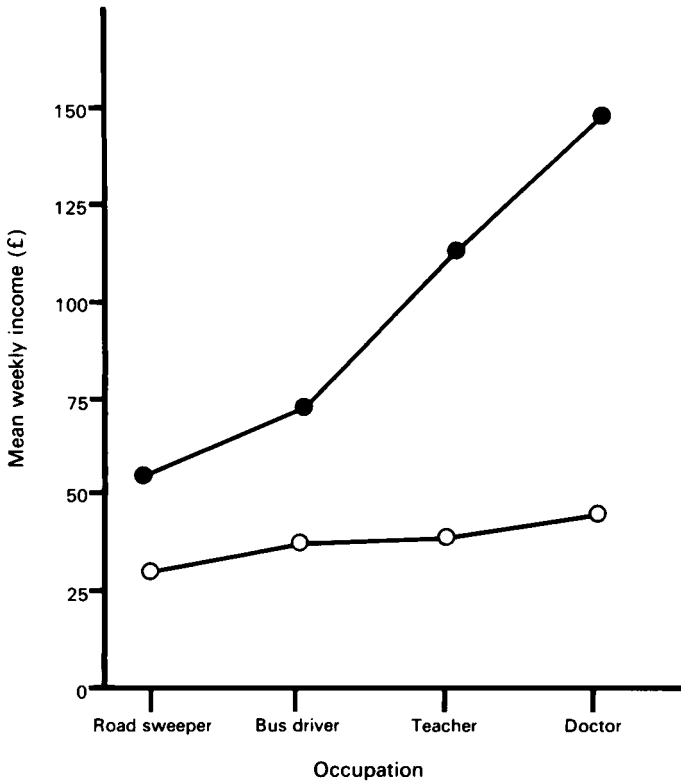
Occupation/class	Age level <sup>b</sup>									
	7 8		8 9		9 10		10 11		11 12	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
<i>Doctor</i>										
WC	27.58	15.87	40.76	21.78	41.67	14.67	48.33	27.25	68.92	24.41
MC	149.75	143.10	115.18	83.09	159.58	105.02	161.67	72.80	145.00	79.71
<i>Teacher</i>										
WC	19.58	10.10	37.69	19.21	42.08	20.83	40.42	19.59	54.08	20.32
MC	135.17	118.90	106.82	67.39	92.92	54.46	120.00	45.78	102.92	45.05
<i>Bus driver</i>										
WC	22.50	16.58	34.61	16.64	33.75	15.54	35.33	14.70	58.67	19.64
MC	86.67	83.81	59.00	44.59	56.67	51.51	87.17	38.75	65.83	24.01
<i>Road sweeper</i>										
WC	25.08	14.30	27.23	12.10	26.25	16.94	29.58	12.51	43.50	11.35
MC	65.58	76.65	61.00	65.40	37.92	30.03	58.33	28.70	62.08	36.52

<sup>a</sup>Amounts in pounds per week.

<sup>b</sup> $n = 12$  for each age level and social class; the ages reflect the range found within each of the five school years at the time of testing.

Turning to within-subject effects, there was a significant effect for occupation ( $F = 63.56$ , d.f. = 3,330,  $P < 0.0001$ ), but also a significant class  $\times$  occupation interaction ( $F = 36.90$ , d.f. = 3,330,  $P < 0.0001$ ). The age  $\times$  occupation interaction was non-significant ( $F = 1.02$ , d.f. = 12,330), as was the three-way interaction ( $F = 1.10$ , d.f. = 12,330). Planned comparisons revealed that the estimates for all four occupations differed from one another in the middle-class group at at least  $P < 0.005$ . In the working-class group the difference between bus driver and teacher was non-significant. The differences between the occupations as a function of class are set out in graphical form in Fig. 1. As no age effects were found, estimates across age levels are summed here. From this figure can be seen the much clearer separation made by the middle-class children between the white-collar and blue-collar occupations than by the working-class group.

Another way of looking at these estimates is in terms of the ratios between the highest and the lowest paid. Table 2 gives the mean doctor/road sweeper ratios by age and class. Analysis by ANOVA revealed a main effect for class ( $F = 7.79$ , d.f. = 110,1,  $P < 0.006$ ), but



**Figure 1.** Income estimates for each occupation by middle-class and working-class children. ●—●, middle class; ○—○, working class.

**Table 2.** Ratios of income estimates for doctor and road sweeper by age and social class

	Age level									
	7-8		8-9		9-10		10-11		11-12	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
WC	1.31	0.66	1.91	1.34	2.63	0.67	1.59	0.72	1.61	0.52
MC	3.32	3.25	2.94	2.66	4.79	5.35	2.88	1.22	2.64	1.42

not for age ( $F=1.89$ ,  $d.f.=110,4$ ). In other words, not only were the middle-class children likely to perceive incomes overall as much higher but they also anticipated greater relative differences between the highest and the lowest paid.

*Judgements of pay differences*

A total of eight children (six WC, two MC) awarded identical amounts to all four occupations and so were not asked about the fairness of inequalities. A further six were unable to decide. The responses of the remainder to the question, ‘Is it fair that [...] gets more than the others?’ were examined by chi square which indicated no significant differences as a function of either age or social class. Responses to the question, ‘Is it fair that [...] gets less than the others?’ produced a very similar pattern. A slightly larger number indicated that the inequality in this direction was unfair but the difference between

these two questions was not significant. As with responses to the first question, there was a tendency for middle-class children to judge the inequality in this direction as fair more frequently than the working-class children, but this difference was also non-significant.

Next an examination was made of estimates of income differences in relation to judgements of fairness. First, the ratio between the highest and lowest income estimate given by each child was calculated. Then, the children in each social class group were divided into those regarding the highest income estimated as fair and those regarding this income as unfair in relation to the others. This gave 2(class)  $\times$  2(fair/unfair) table. The mean ratios in each cell of this table were: 2.02 (working class, judging fair), 2.05 (working class, judging unfair), 4.15 (middle class, judging fair), and 2.78 (middle class, judging unfair). The same procedure was repeated but this time dividing the children in each social class according to their judgement of the relative fairness of the lowest income estimated. The corresponding mean ratios were 2.20, 2.01, 3.54 and 2.45. ANOVAs on each of the two sets of data revealed not only the anticipated class effect but also significant class  $\times$  fairness interactions ( $P < 0.05$ ). Thus middle-class children who judged inequalities to be fair perceived greater differences in income than those who judged them unfair. Among the working-class children there was no difference in perceptions related to differences in judgements.

Table 3 gives the distribution of responses to the question, 'Would it be better if they all got the same amount of money?' Overall, this suggestion was significantly more likely to be rejected by the older children ( $\chi^2 = 10.5$ , d.f. = 4,  $P < 0.05$ ) and by the middle-class children ( $\chi^2 = 4.87$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.05$ ). An examination of the responses of boys and girls indicated no significant differences in judgements about the fairness of inequalities or in responses to the suggested equality of incomes.

**Table 3.** Reactions to proposed equality of income as a function of age and social class

	Age level					Total
	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	
Working class						
For	7	8	9	8	5	37
Against	4	4	4	4	7	23
Middle class						
For	9	3	6	4	1	23
Against	2	8	6	8	11	35

Children's justifications for their judgements were categorized in terms of three alternative principles of distributive justice—equality, equity and need—these having previously been found to characterize the judgements of children in this age range (e.g. Damon, 1977). In the event there was very little differentiation among responses in these terms. A majority of children offered reasons that would be categorized as some form of equity consideration; they argued that differences in income were fair because there were differences in the work involved in each job (e.g. 'I think it is (fair) because it is harder to look at somebody's body and sort problems than to sweep the roads' or 'He has to do a lot of training before he starts'). Categorized in terms of the dominant theme in their replies, 71 children gave equity arguments. By comparison, nine gave equality arguments (e.g. 'Not really (fair) because they have to work the same hours . . . a road sweeper works just as long as a doctor and spends just as much time and energy as a doctor'), and only four gave need arguments (e.g. 'It depends if they have children or not. If they have a

family they have to get all the food and clothing for the family'). The remainder either could not offer any reasons (15), or gave a description (17) of one or more of the occupations (e.g. 'He just sweeps up rubbish. He helps everyone get better'), or offered an argument that did not fit into the other categories [e.g. '... (inequalities are) perfectly fair because they all have a choice of which job they want to do and probably take account of how much money they want to have'].

Almost all arguments rejecting the proposal that incomes be equal were based on considerations of equity (43) rather than need (3). Arguments in favour were either reiterations that all would get the same (13) or else referred to inputs (10) or consequences (20) (e.g. 'It would give everyone the same chance to buy the same things ...' or 'So there will not be any squabbling'). A few children again offered descriptions of one or more occupations or could offer no reasons. There were no significant age trends or sex differences in the kinds of arguments offered either with respect to perceived inequalities or in response to proposed equality. There were also no class differences in preferences for particular principles of distributive justice.

None the less, closer examination of the kinds of reasons children were offering did suggest that there may be differences between the middle- and working-class children in their thinking about income distributions. There were three differences in particular. Firstly, working-class children were more likely to offer descriptions in support of their judgements (14 vs. 3:  $\chi^2 = 6.84$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.01$ ). Secondly, the predominant form of equity consideration they offered was that a person had to work harder in one job than another. This consideration was frequently proposed by middle-class children but so were several others such as job difficulty, the amount of work involved, the degree of responsibility and the training required. Finally, the middle-class children were more likely to offer more than one reason ( $\chi^2 = 13.70$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.001$ ).

#### *Income and property*

Each child was categorized according to whether his or her answers to the questions about who had the nicest and who the worst house clearly attributed differences in housing to differences in income. The results of this classification are given in Table 4. This attribution was more often made by the older children ( $\chi^2 = 14.75$ , d.f. = 4,  $P < 0.01$ ) and by the middle-class children ( $\chi^2 = 25.79$ , d.f. = 1,  $P < 0.001$ ).

**Table 4.** Perceptions of a link between housing and income as a function of age and social class

	Age level					Total
	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	
<b>Working class</b>						
Link mentioned	1	2	5	6	7	21
Link not mentioned	12	10	8	7	5	42
<b>Middle class</b>						
Link mentioned	6	9	11	8	12	46
Link not mentioned	6	3	1	4	0	14

#### **Discussion**

These results indicate that differences in social class background can be associated with very different beliefs about the extent of economic inequalities in society. In particular, the middle-class children in this study appeared to believe that inequalities in income are

considerably greater than did the working-class children. This is reflected most clearly by the respective ratios in the estimates given by the two groups of children. Hence, although a majority of children in both groups shared the view that income inequalities are justified, their views were associated with very different beliefs about the scale of those inequalities. Moreover, the middle-class children seemed more committed to the justice of such inequalities given their reactions to the equal pay proposal.

Given the class differences found in this study, how are they to be conceptualized and explained? It might be argued that the results merely reflect probable IQ differences between the middle- and working-class groups. The cognitive-developmental theory of social knowledge (cf. Damon, 1977; Turiel, 1983) suggests a similar interpretation. According to this theory the most relevant variations in knowledge are those which lie along a developmental dimension of structural complexity; IQ is correlated with rate of movement along this dimension. If middle- and working-class children differ from one another it is because they have achieved different degrees of progress along the same continuum. If either interpretation is appropriate, one should find age differences which parallel the class differences. In other words, the differences between middle- and working-class children should be of the same form as those between older and younger children. In fact, parallels of this kind were found only with respect to responses to the proposal that incomes be equalized and in explanations of housing differences. Neither interpretation is consistent with the findings regarding income estimates; here there were substantial class effects but no significant age effects at all.

Jahoda (1982) argued that certain forms of *social* knowledge, unlike counterparts in the logico-mathematical domain, are heavily information-dependent. He proposed that middle-class children would be more sophisticated in their appreciation of economic matters than their working-class peers essentially because they are better informed: they inhabit an environment that is richer in the relevant information. Jahoda's interpretation is more appropriate to the present results though to some extent it does still retain the idea that differences between children can be described in terms of levels of development.

We offer the following interpretation. Knowledge specifically concerned with socio-economic stratification is unequally distributed in society and its distribution is related to the socio-economic structure. This knowledge takes the form of 'social representations' (Moscovici, 1984); it consists of shared, socially generated and sustained systems of ideas, beliefs and values. Children assimilate most readily those social representations that are most dominant, widespread and important within their community. The current findings, we believe, reflect the fact that social representations of economic inequalities are more detailed, extensive and salient in the middle class. Hence children who are members of that class assimilate these representations more rapidly and thoroughly. The same representations are more 'external' to the working-class milieu and so children in this class have acquired more simplified and tenuously held versions. We take the much more differentiated income estimates, the greater resistance to equality of income, the greater emphasis on income as the differentiating factor in housing, and the greater variety of justifications for inequality characteristic of the middle-class group to be reflections of this difference.

This interpretation does not exclude developments in the structural complexity of children's social knowledge of the kind emphasized by Damon (1977) and Turiel (1983), for example; social representations possess a complexity which limits their accessibility to children. But social representations are also defined by content. Cognitive-developmental principles can tell us something about the sequence in which children acquire knowledge but not everything about the particular knowledge they will acquire. This also depends on its currency and availability in their various social milieux.

One interesting aspect of the results is that the middle-class children who judge income inequality to be fair perceive greater relative inequalities than those who judge them to be unfair. Tajfel's (1972) intergroup theory offers a possible explanation for this effect. The theory predicts that members of a high status group will emphasize their distinctiveness in comparison to low status groups on such dimensions as are available for comparison. In the present case the relevant dimension is income. Thus, if middle-class children, the higher status group, do emphasize distinctiveness by predicting larger income differences between middle- and working-class occupations then it would be consistent for them to regard these differences as desirable or fair. (We are grateful to Margaret Wetherell and to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this interpretation.) The same process may underlie a related effect: the middle-class children on the average made a very much clearer separation in income estimates between the two 'middle-class' and the two 'working-class' jobs. The working-class children made no significant discrimination at this boundary, namely between the teacher and the bus driver.

Many questions remain, including whether such differences persist into adulthood and what the precise influences are in the respective class environments that produce the differences observed—whether parental values, the ethos of the schools, the information provided by adults, the beliefs of peers, or some conjunction of all these. Our aim in this study, however, was not to seek explanations but to show that there might be something to explain.

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