

Affluent people less likely to reach out to others in times of chaos, study suggests

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While chaos drives some to seek comfort in friends and family, others gravitate toward money and material possessions, new study finds.

(Medical Xpress)—Crises are said to bring people closer together. But a new study from UC Berkeley suggests that while the have-nots reach out to one another in times of trouble, the wealthy are more apt to find comfort in material possessions.

"In times of uncertainty, we see a dramatic polarization, with the rich more focused on holding onto and attaining wealth and the poor spending more time with friends and loved ones," said Paul Piff, a post-doctoral scholar in psychology at UC Berkeley and lead author of the paper published online this month in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

These new findings add to a growing body of scholarship at UC Berkeley on socio-economic class—defined by both [household income](#) and education — and social behavior.

Results from five separate experiments shed new light on how humans from varying socio-economic backgrounds may respond to both natural and man-made disasters, including economic recessions, political instability, earthquakes and hurricanes. They also help explain why, in times of turmoil, people can become more polarized in their responses to uncertainty and chaos.

For example, when asked if they would move across the country for a higher-paying job, [study participants](#) from the lower class responded that they would decline in favor of staying close to friends, family and colleagues. By contrast, upper class participants opted to take the job and cut ties with their community.

Although the study does not provide a definitive reason for why the upper class, when stressed, focuses more on worldly goods than relationships, it posits that "material wealth may be a particularly salient, accessible and preferred individual coping mechanism ... when they are threatened by perceptions of chaos within the social environment."

Each experiment was done with a different group of ethnically and socio-economically diverse participants, all of whom reported their social status (household income and education) as well as their level of community mindedness and/or preoccupation with money.

In a lab setting, researchers induced various psychological states in their subjects — such as uncertainty, helplessness or anxiety — so they could accurately assess how social class shapes the likelihood of people turning to others or to wealth in the face of perceived chaos.

Chaos is defined in the study as "the feeling that the world is unknown, unpredictable, seemingly random ... a general sense that the world and one's life have turned uncertain and topsy-turvy." This uncertainty typically triggers either a fight-or-flight or a "tend-and-befriend" response, which researchers used to assess participants reactions to induced stress.

In the first experiment, a nationwide sample of 76 men and women ranging in age from 18 to 66 were tasked with selecting, online, a visual graph that best reflected the trajectory of economic ups and downs they believed they were likely to face in their lifetimes. The results showed that the upper class and, to a small degree, Caucasian participants, were less likely than the lower class and minorities to anticipate financial instability. Lower-class participants who expected more turmoil in their lives were more likely to turn to community to cope with perceived chaos, the study found.

In the second experiment, 72 college students were asked to write about positive and negative factors that could impact their educational experience. Potential threats that they cited included canceled classes, tuition hikes and academic failures. Again, worries about chaos and helplessness spurred lower class college students – but not the upper class ones – to say they would turn to their community for support. In the third experiment, 77 students were put through computerized tasks in which they rearranged into sentences words that either alluded to chaos or something negative. This exercise was designed to prime certain participants to see their environment as unpredictable and scary. When these participants were offered five minutes to take part in a community building task where they could develop friendships with a group of their peers, only lower class participants jumped at the opportunity.

The fourth experiment had 135 students unscramble similar words into sentences and then report on how much they agreed with such statements

as "Money is the only thing I can really count on" and "Time spent not making money is time wasted." When made to feel as if the world was chaotic, upper class participants consistently agreed more strongly with these statements.

In the fifth experiment, 115 students were given a hypothetical scenario in which an employer offered them a new job for a higher salary, with the caveat that they would need to move, and potentially lose touch with their current network of family, friends and colleagues. Again, when primed with feelings that the world was uncertain and chaotic, upper class participants were more amenable to cutting ties and taking the job, whereas lower class participants opted to stay close to their support networks.

"Given the very different forms of coping that we observe among the upper and lower classes, our research suggests that in times of economic uncertainty and social instability, disparities between the haves and the have-nots could grow ever wider," Piff said.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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