

New research finds way to reduce bias in children

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Children's views of inequality may be influenced by how its causes are explained to them, finds a new study by a team of psychology researchers. The work offers insights into the factors that affect how

larger social issues are perceived at a young age and points to new ways to reduce bias toward lower-status economic groups.

"When making sense of social inequalities, adults may consider the structural forces at play—for example, people may cite policies related to legacy admissions when thinking about how disparities first arise," says Rachel Leshin, a New York University doctoral student and the lead author of the study, which appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*. "But [children](#) don't necessarily see differences in status in this way—and when children are prompted to consider the structural forces, they tend to interpret these structures differently from how adults do."

"However, our work shows that children can think about these matters in a similar manner as adults do if the structures driving inequality are explained to them in specific ways," she adds. "Such approaches, we found, also reduced the extent of bias children felt against a lower-income group relative to a higher-income group."

It's long been shown that children become aware of inequality from a young age and quickly develop status-related biases as a result. For example, they often view more positively those from high-status groups (e.g., those with more material resources or those who belong to groups that they associate with greater wealth) and, moreover, willingly accept group disparities.

In the *PNAS* study, Leshin and Marjorie Rhodes, a professor in NYU's Department of Psychology, examined how children reason about [economic inequality](#) in order to understand how the explanations provided for an inequality shaped children's responses to it, such as how they feel about a low-status group or whether they want to rectify the inequality. In doing so, the work sought to understand how these explanations could be used to reduce biased views against lower-status

groups.

To do so, Leshin and Rhodes recruited more than 200 children, aged five to 10, to participate in an online study. In the study, children learned about two fictional groups—"Toogits" (a high-status group) and "Flurps" (a low-status group). The authors note that fictional groups are often used in testing children's attitudes in order to diminish bias linked to "real-world" social categories.

These groups were described as differing in wealth and resources, such as: "See this Flurp? This Flurp lives in this house. And you know what else? Grown-up Flurps have jobs that only pay them a little money. Because Flurps don't have that much money, this Flurp only got a pair of socks for his/her birthday, and he/she didn't get to have a birthday party at all."

The children were also shown images that represented where the two groups lived, with the Toogit shown in a nice, polished house and the Flurp shown in a less attractive house.

In order to unpack how the "causes" provided to explain the inequality shaped children's responses to it, the researchers gave children one of three explanations for the inequality shown through the two fictional groups: one attributed it to structural causes and cited the "high-status group" as the structures' creators (i.e., "... because of rules that [the high-status group] made up a long time ago"); another attributed it to structural causes but did not identify their creator (i.e., "... because of rules that were made up a long time ago"); and one, the control condition, didn't provide an explanation at all (i.e., "... it's been like that for a long time").

The researchers sought to understand whether and to what extent these explanations would shape children's responses to the inequality,

including their level of bias against the low-status economic group.

The results showed that only the "structural explanation" that identified the high-status group as the "catalyst responsible" for the different circumstances of the two groups produced notable effects. Children in this condition reported lower levels of bias toward these fictional groups, perceived the status hierarchy as less fair, and opted to give more resources to the low-status group relative to those in the other two conditions.

By contrast, children who heard a structural explanation that did not cite the high-status group as a cause for these differences (instead citing a third-party—i.e., "the person who got to make the rules") responded no differently than did those in the control condition who heard no explanation at all.

"In engaging with children about inequality, whether it's linked to wealth or [educational attainment](#), it's important to not only identify a structural cause underlying a disparity, such as legacy admissions, but to also identify the group influential in the implementation of those structures," explains Leshin. "We think these findings can be used to better understand how we can meaningfully engage with children about [inequality](#)."

More information: Leshin, Rachel A., Structural explanations for inequality reduce children's biases and promote rectification only if they implicate the high-status group, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2310573120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2310573120).
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