

# Empathy and Wealth

## As wealth increases, empathy seems to decrease

by *Patrick Schmidt*

The concept of empathy is inseparable from intercultural sensitivity. The premise of any training is that a feeling of compassion needs to be developed, which in turn leads to better communication. Empathy, however, is not equally distributed and this has major implications in intercultural relations. Essentially, research has shown that one's sense of wealth vis-a-vis others determines to what degree he or she is willing to enter into another person's subjective world.

In its April, 2012 issue, *Scientific American* published a fascinating article. "How Wealth Reduces Compassion" reviews the latest studies on the relationship between empathy and material wealth and comes to the conclusion that the richer you are, the less likely you are to act fairly.

On first reflection, this would seem to go against common sense. If you already have enough to take care of yourself and your family, wouldn't you be inclined to think about others' needs? Not according to Berkeley psychologists Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner.

They conducted experiments on whether social class (education, wealth, job prestige) influences how much we care about the feelings of others. In one study, they surveyed drivers at a busy four-way intersection. Drivers of luxury cars were found to be more likely to cut off other

drivers rather than wait their turn. Upper-class drivers also tended not to stop for a person trying to cross the street, even after making eye contact.

Later, Piff and his colleagues came up with a clever approach as to whether selfishness leads to wealth (rather than vice-versa). Participants were asked to compare themselves to people better or worse off than themselves. Before leaving, they were shown a jar of candy and told they could take home as much as they wished, what was left would be given to children in a laboratory close by. The participants who thought of themselves as better off took far more, leaving little behind for the children.

Another study examined how social class influences compassion. On a regular basis, less affluent people were more likely to describe feelings of compassion for people who were said to be suffering. Results were unchanged after controlling for factors such as gender, ethnicity and spiritual beliefs.

Similarly, participants from different social classes watched a video about children with cancer and their hearts were monitored. Those on the lower end of the spectrum (for both income and education) were more likely to display compassion and their heart-rates slowed down considerably--they were paying more attention to what they were seeing and hearing.

<b>Editorial</b>	1
Fons Trompenaars	2
<i>One of the most influential management thinkers in our time</i>	
Empathy and Wealth	8
<i>Social class and caring for others</i>	
To Discern Water is to Discern Culture	10
<i>An atypical intercultural seminar in Milan</i>	
From Owens to Obama	11
<i>Going beyond racial ignorance</i>	
Intercultural "Bloopers"	15
<i>How marketing people can seriously misunderstand their customers</i>	
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	20

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*Although Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney tries to project feelings of empathy, his income tax returns suggest strongly that he is very indifferent to the needs of his fellow Americans.*



Other research tells us that higher the social strata, the less likely people recognize the emotions of others. They also pay less attention to those with whom they interact, simultaneously doodling or checking e-mail on their smart phones.

The intriguing question is why research consistently shows that wealth and status decrease our feelings of empathy? Conversely, if you have fewer resources, wouldn't you be more likely to be selfish? Piff suspects this paradox is related to the feelings that abundance gives us, a sense of self-importance and relative independence. The less we depend on others, the less we may care about their feelings.

And then there's the new attitude we have toward wealth, as depicted in the film Wall Street. Beginning in the 1980s, financiers and entrepreneurs began championing the mantra, "Greed is good". Thirty years later the gap between rich and poor in Western democracies has returned to what it was in 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression.

As anyone who reads a newspaper knows, the Crash of 2008 changed nothing except to transfer trillions of taxpayers' dollars across the developed world from public coffers to private industry and bank vaults. Most of the same people continue to run the finance and business sectors, doing business the same way, paying themselves

the same bonuses. And right-wing politicians the world over continue to fight against regulation of any sort.

If we accept the research-based premise that social class influences empathy, it stands to reason that people of privilege are the least likely to make decisions that help those in need. Yet political power has always resided among the upper classes and—with increased deregulation of campaign financing—this has never been more true than today.

Next fall's U.S. election may well set the tone for the future. Republican candidate Mitt Romney has bragged about forcing welfare mothers to work when he was governor of Massachusetts. He earned over \$21 million dollars last year without having to work himself, a simple return on his investments. He paid only 13.9% in income tax (far less than most American workers) but wants to cut taxes even further, as well as many of the social programs they pay for. And although he got rich by closing companies and out-sourcing labor to China, India and Mexico, he says he has no need to apologize for success in business. A few weeks ago, when asked about students who couldn't afford to go to college, he suggested all they had to do was borrow the money from their parents.

The most disturbing thing of all is that he could actually win.

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