

New study reveals why people react differently to economic disparities

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We react less negatively to extreme manifestations of economic

disparity, such as homelessness, if we think the economic system is fair and legitimate, and these differences in reactivity are even detectable at the physiological level, finds a team of psychology researchers. The research, which appears in the journal *Nature Communications*, offers new insights into why we have varying reactions to inequality.

"Research has shown that people generally have an aversion to unequal distributions of resources, an example of which may be a person we see sleeping on a grate or lacking access to basic necessities, healthcare, and education," explains Shahrzad Goudarzi, the paper's lead author and a doctoral candidate in New York University's Department of Psychology. "Yet many people either pay little attention to or are otherwise unbothered by rising economic disparities—responses that some may have difficulty understanding. This research begins to explain such differences: beliefs that legitimize and justify the [economic system](#) diminish our deep-seated aversion to inequality, buffering us against negative emotions in response to it."

Previous research has shown that humans, and some other primates, have developed an evolutionary aversion towards inequality in distribution of goods and resources. For instance, children as young as six years old have been found to refuse items if it meant having more than their peers. Nonetheless, public opinion data suggest that a large percentage of Americans are not bothered by economic inequality. For example, a 2018 Gallup Poll showed that one-third of Americans are satisfied with the existing distribution of income and wealth. Such acceptance, despite general preferences for greater equality, raises the question of how people manage such contradictions.

To address this, the scientists in the *Nature Communications* study conducted a series of six experiments. Two of these (Studies 1 and 2) were done using participants from Amazon's "Mechanical Turk" and Prolific Academic, tools in which individuals are compensated for

completing small tasks and which are frequently used in running behavioral science studies. Four others (Studies 3-6) involved college undergraduates.

In Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked their views of the American economic system by registering their agreement with statements such as the following: "Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements" and "If people work hard, they almost always get what they want." A week later, some viewed a video in which a homeless interviewee described their circumstances, recounting their routines and struggles. Separate control groups viewed mundane videos, depicting interviews about fishing and producing coffee.

Those who believed the American economic system was fair, legitimate, and justified ("system justifiers"), compared with those who did not, reported feeling less [negative emotions](#) after watching videos depicting homelessness.

Studies 3-5 replicated these steps, then added a new component: participants' physiological responses were measured by gauging their skin conductance levels and subtle facial muscle movements. This method affords a deeper accounting of our responses because it captures involuntary reactions to stimuli—negative arousal and emotional distress. Here, economic system justifiers showed comparatively low levels of negative affect and arousal while viewing people experiencing homelessness. By contrast, economic system justification was not associated with emotional reactions to the control videos.

Study 6 went a step further—it was aimed at capturing emotions in the context of people's daily lives. In this study, undergraduates received four text messages a day for nine consecutive days, prompting them to complete a short survey using their smartphones. Two of the daily surveys were designed to measure reactions to inequality, with one

survey asking participants to indicate whether they had encountered someone they considered very poor and another whether they had encountered someone very rich compared with themselves; the order of these surveys was randomized across days. Regardless of whether participants reported such an encounter, they were asked about their emotions—either in light of the encounter (if one was reported) or over the preceding two hours (if no encounter was reported).

Consistent with the previous studies, those identified as "system justifiers" reported less negative emotion after their everyday exposure to rich and [poor people](#) than did people who were more critical of the existing economic system.

"These results provide the strongest evidence to date that system-justifying beliefs diminish aversion to inequality in economic contexts," observes Eric Knowles, an associate professor of psychology at NYU and one of the paper's co-authors.

More information: Shahrzad Goudarzi et al, Economic system justification predicts muted emotional responses to inequality, *Nature Communications* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41467-019-14193-z](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-14193-z)

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