

Looking up to the Joneses: Consequences of the perceptions of white wealth

July 30 2020

Before the era of COVID-19, research suggested that premature deaths among white Americans were rising. Even before the era of COVID-19, these findings were surprising. As Dr. Cooley explains, "These trends were puzzling to us because white people, on average, have more wealth than other racial groups and are generally privileged in our society." As a result, Cooley and colleagues questioned whether factors other than income and education, known as objective indicators of status, may not buy happiness for white people. Instead, they investigated the role of social comparisons—or the desire to "keep up with the Joneses."

Their research indicates that white Americans tend to compare their own status to other white Americans—people they perceive as much wealthier than their selves; and, the greater the perceived disparity, the worse they feel—psychologically and physically—regardless of their objective status.

In one study, white and Black Americans (490 white people and 519 Black people) were asked to rank their own status on a ladder—selecting higher ladder rungs if they felt high status and lower rungs if they felt low status. Next, participants were asked to rank "the majority of their racial group" (i.e., white or Black people) on the same scale. The researchers followed with questions about participants' health, emotions, and wellbeing. A second study replicated their findings.

"Results revealed that white Americans tended to make upward status comparisons—in other words, they most often compared their status to

other white people—people who they perceived as having higher status than the self" says Erin Cooley, one of the study's co-lead authors. "In contrast, Black Americans most often compared their [status](#) to other Black people—people who they perceived as doing worse than the self." And, among white Americans, larger upward comparisons were associated with feeling fewer positive emotions and having worse physical health.

Interestingly, these data suggest that it is exactly because of this belief that white = wealth, that many [white people](#) feel as if they are falling behind.

Although their work illuminates psychological processes that may harm the health of white Americans, the authors also urge readers to consider two points: (1) these data were collected before the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) as clearly revealed by the pandemic, minority racial/ethnic groups—particularly African Americans and Latinx Americans—are disproportionately impacted by poor health outcomes and economic downturns.

"Due to racism and persistent racial inequities, there are many health disparities experienced by people of color in the United States including rates of heart disease and diabetes," says Jazmin Brown-Iannuzzi, also a co-lead author of the research. Thus, while the authors think the current work represents an interesting psychological mechanism for white Americans, this work should not detract from the fact that structural racism in this country creates health and wealth inequalities along racial lines.

More information: Erin Cooley et al, Investigating the Health Consequences for White Americans Who Believe White Americans Are Wealthy, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550620905219](#)

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Looking up to the Joneses: Consequences of the perceptions of white wealth (2020, July 30) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-07-joneses-consequences-perceptions-white-wealth.html>

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