

Increasing the Complexity of Young Adolescents' Beliefs About Poverty and Inequality: Results of an 8th Grade Social Studies Curriculum Intervention

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Abstract Poverty and economic hardship remain a reality for many of America's children. Although the causes of poverty are varied, Americans strongly endorse individual responsibility as a primary cause. Because beliefs about poverty originate in childhood and adolescence, intervention efforts targeting young people may be particularly effective in shifting attitudes about the poor and policies designed to help the disadvantaged. To test this proposition, the current study evaluated the efficacy of a 1-week 8th grade social studies curriculum focusing on poverty and inequality. Study participants were upper middle-class youth enrolled in multiple sections of a Social Studies course taught by a single teacher. Participants had little direct contact with marginalized groups such as poor and homeless individuals in their communities. Students ($N = 66$) completed a survey assessing their attitudes and beliefs about poverty and poor people prior to, and 1 week and 6 months post-instruction. Results indicated that the curriculum was partially effective in increasing the

complexity of students' beliefs about poverty. Students were more likely to emphasize fatalistic causes and less likely to list individualistic causes for poverty following instruction than before, but rarely emphasized structural causes for poverty and rated individual effort as the most influential factor in determining one's success. Implications of the study findings for curriculum efforts targeting young adolescents' reasoning about economic inequality and inequity and directions for future studies are discussed.

Keywords Causes of poverty · Early adolescents · Curriculum and intervention

Introduction

Income inequality in the United States, or the discrepancy between the "haves" and the "have-nots," has increased dramatically during the past decade and presents a pressing social issue. From 2002 to 2007, whereas the average income of the top 1% of households rose 62%, comparable estimates for the bottom 90% of households was just 4% (Feller and Stone 2009). As highlighted by recent media coverage of the recent economic recession, while the rich are getting richer, many people in the US are struggling to make ends meet. For example, results of a recent ABC News survey showed that among those with annual incomes of less than \$35,000, 79% expressed concern with maintaining their current standard of living, 64% were worried about their finances, and 69% reported experiencing economic stress (ABC News 2010). Also troubling is that approximately 39 million people in the United States currently live in poverty, defined as an annual income of \$22,050 for a family of four (DeNavas-Walt

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et al. 2010). This includes more than 15 million children, over 6 million of whom live in extreme poverty (i.e., family income below 50% of the federal poverty line; DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010). In total, 29 million children (41%) live in families with incomes less than two times the federal poverty level (i.e., \$44,100 for a family of four). Based on these overwhelming statistics, it is clear that poverty is a societal issue that directly affects millions of children, and indirectly affects millions more of their classmates.

This is the economic landscape in which today's youth are growing up and the context within which they are forming opinions about the poor and the government's responsibility to provide assistance. Oftentimes these opinions are drawn from the media and American ideology of individual responsibility (Kluegel and Smith 1986), with little explicit discussion about the complex causes or consequences of what it means to be poor in the United States. With this as their main source of information, youth may develop simplistic views of poverty as being due primarily to individualistic deficits (e.g., laziness, lack of perseverance, poor decision making or low intelligence) without giving adequate attention to structural causes (e.g., job shortages, low wages, discrimination, educational disparities and unequal opportunities), or some combination of both causal influences. To help youth grasp the complexity of reasons for why an individual may be poor, it may be necessary to have more explicit discussions about poverty (Seider 2011), a proposition tested in the current study. More specifically, this study assessed whether explicit instruction about the causes and consequences of poverty, delivered as part of an existing social studies curriculum, led to shifts in early adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about poverty and the government's responsibility to assist poor people. The implemented curriculum was multifaceted and involved engaging students in discussions of the definition and causes of poverty as well as exercises designed to build empathy for those living in poverty.

There is theoretical and empirical support to suggest that early adolescents' ideas of social inequality may be particularly amenable to change. Developmental intergroup theory (DIT; Bigler and Liben 2007) posits that social-cognitive skills such as perspective taking, empathy, and cognitive flexibility may be central to the development of respect and inclusion. Early adolescents demonstrate the needed cognitive capacities to perceive discrimination, including institutional discrimination (Brown and Bigler 2005) and to think about social issues in a more complex manner (Brown et al. 2007; Chafel 1997; Flanagan and Tucker 1999). Therefore, the current study evaluates the efficacy of a social studies curriculum focusing on poverty and inequality in an 8th grade public school.

Youths' Ideas About Poverty and Government Responsibility to Address Economic Inequality

Previous research indicates children as young as preschool age are able to distinguish between people who are "rich" and "poor" and to associate concrete items such as types of homes, clothing, and possessions with each group (e.g., Chafel 1997; Ramsey 1991). Chafel and Neitzel (2005) showed that children as young as age 8 express poverty as being unfair and suggest ways to alleviate poverty reflecting a charitable ethos. This is in contrast to older children's reports. Although older children provide multiple reasons for poverty and inequality, their responses have been shown to largely consist of individualistic as opposed to structural causes (Chafel 1997; Leahy 1983, 1990). More recent work by Flanagan and Tucker (1999) shows that students' greater endorsement of individual causes for three societal issues—poverty, unemployment, and homelessness—was more strongly associated with the belief that America is a land of equal opportunity and that government support encourages dependency. There is some evidence of socioeconomic status differences in youth's views on economic inequality. Specifically, middle-class and affluent youth are more likely to endorse individualistic explanations for poverty and wealth as compared with adolescents from poor and working-class backgrounds (Cozzarelli et al. 2001a, b; Skafte 1988).

Attitudes about poverty are frequently associated with stances on governmental policy. The extant scholarship finds that American adults overwhelmingly view individualistic factors, such as effort and ability, as the primary causes of economic inequality, and endorse the Protestant Work Ethic (i.e., pulling one's self up by one's bootstraps) as a means for escaping poverty and achieving success (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd and Bowman 1998). When viewed from this lens, adults tend to oppose redistributive wealth policies and programs perceived as encouraging government dependency and discouraging work. On the other hand, when economic inequality is attributed to societal causes such as institutional discrimination and job shortages, adults tend to be more supportive of government spending and services designed to redress inequalities (Bullock et al. 2003; Iyengar 1990; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Equally important, but less well investigated, is whether youth exhibit similar associations between beliefs about economic inequality, inequity, and government responsibility.

There is a small body of research examining youths' ideas about the government's responsibility to aid disadvantaged populations (e.g., Flanagan and Tucker 1999). Adolescents generally believe the government should play a larger role in the country's outcomes than adults (Lopez and Kirby 2005). Brown et al. (2007) found that African

American children between the ages of 6 and 14 believed that the government should have played an important role in aiding the victims of Hurricane Katrina by providing houses, jobs for families, and money. A majority of ninth graders in a national sample reported that the government should be responsible for providing free basic education and health care for everyone and a sufficient standard of living for the elderly (Baldi et al. 2001).

Thus, while youth are capable of engaging in complex reasoning about social issues, including poverty and the governments' role in providing for its citizens, the extent to which such beliefs are amenable to change and influenced by explicit instruction is less well understood. Determining this was a primary aim of the current study. Before discussing the specifics of the curriculum evaluated in this study, we briefly review the extant literature on the effectiveness of curriculum efforts to change beliefs about poverty and economic inequality.

Teaching Youth About Poverty and Economic Inequality

Although prior studies have evaluated the merits of using curricula to teach about economic inequality, much of this work has almost exclusively focused on high school students and college undergraduates and/or included an integrated community service learning component wherein students volunteer at social service agencies or organizations serving poor and homeless individuals (e.g., Coghlan and Huggins 2004; Goldsmith 2006; Seider 2011). For example, students at Boston College have the option to enroll in a year-long program called *The Pulse Program* (Seider et al. 2010). Criteria includes enrollment in a philosophy and theology course on personal and social responsibility that meets weekly and volunteering at a social service agency serving those contending with poverty. The program has been shown to be effective in changing college students' understanding of poverty. Specifically, students who participated in *The Pulse Program* emphasized structural causes over individual causes more so than students not enrolled in the program (Seider et al. 2010). Changes were attributed to a combination of direct contact with individuals through the service placement and academic assignments (i.e., reading, discussing, and reflecting upon the assigned readings; Seider et al. 2010). In contrast to such efforts with young adults and older adolescents, few studies have examined the effects of curriculum designed to teach early adolescents about poverty and economic inequality.

Whereas service learning opportunities have become increasingly more popular in high schools and college, they are not as widespread in middle schools across the United States. Correspondingly, the curriculum evaluated in the

current study did not include a service learning component and students' learning about poverty was informed by in-classroom activities and discussion. Our approach was informed by developmental research shown to be effective in reducing ethnic bias among young children with little direct cross-ethnic contact themselves. Procedures such as reading stories to children about cross-ethnic friends (e.g., stories in which an ethnic in-group peer befriends an ethnic out-group peer), followed by a discussion of cross-ethnic relationships have been shown to be effective ways to increase children's tolerance toward other ethnic peers (Cameron et al. 2006, 2007). In a similar vein, the current study used stories, games, and discussions to vicariously expose and heighten children's awareness about poverty and the lives of people who are poor in the United States.

The Current Study

In this study, we evaluated if explicit teaching of a social studies lesson about poverty and economic inequality led to shifts in early adolescents' understanding of the causes of poverty, beliefs about governmental responsibility for provision of services, and beliefs about equality and success in America. Youth completed surveys at three time points: 1 week prior to, 1 week after, and 6 months after the curriculum had been introduced.

For the purposes of the current study, we adapted a standard 8th grade social studies lesson module (Feinberg and Lyon 2004) entitled, *Confronting the Cycle of Poverty*, that was explicitly designed to address the National Council for Social Studies curriculum standard on global connections. Whereas the original curriculum focused on international issues of poverty, the curriculum used in the current study emphasized poverty in the United States. The curriculum involved five, 45 min lessons taught over a 1-week period. It utilized a multi-pronged approach, with the aid of activities and discussions, to teach factual information and promote perspective taking and empathy toward the poor. The students' regular social studies teacher taught the lessons.

This curriculum was selected because it is theoretically linked to two strategies shown to be effective in attitude change (Aboud and Brown in press). First, DIT (Bigler and Liben 2007) contends that children notice differences between groups (e.g., racial differences in occupational prestige), and form their own essentialist explanations for the differences they notice (e.g., attributing racial differences in occupational prestige to innate differences in intelligence). Explicit discussions about structural and institutional reasons for group differences (e.g., racial discrimination) provide a counterpoint to children's natural tendency to make essentialist and internal attributions, thus

reducing stereotypes and bias. Empirical evidence confirms this. A study by Hughes et al. (2007) found that explicit conversations about racial discrimination reduced racial biases among White elementary school children more than when discrimination was not explicitly mentioned. In a similar manner, the current study provided explicit teaching about the complex reasons for poverty to counter and reduce youths' predominant tendency to endorse individualistic explanations for why people are poor.

A second theoretical reason to expect the curriculum to affect attitude change is the curriculum's emphasis on perspective taking and empathy toward the poor. Key to both perspective taking and empathy is the ability to view the complex reasons underlying a given experience or circumstance. By *stepping into someone else's shoes*, individuals are less likely to make only internal attributions and blame the victim. A recent review of prejudice reduction interventions show that developing perspective taking and empathy in children is one of the most effective mechanisms for reducing bias (Aboud and Brown in press; Pfeifer et al. 2007). This increase in empathy and perspective-taking appears to be the reason why stories about cross-ethnic friendship are effective (i.e., youth can see an out-group peer "through the eyes" of an in-group peer; Aboud and Brown in press). This mechanism is equally applicable to changing youths' attitudes about the poor. The curriculum implemented in the present study addressed the causes and consequences of poverty, and included activities designed to simulate experiences of poverty and build empathy and perspective taking in students.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 8th grade students attending a public middle school in a suburban community bordering a southeastern metropolitan city. Students were enrolled in an honors social studies class. All students participated in the lesson (6 sections total, $N = 98$); however, surveys were completed by only those students for whom parent consent was obtained and who themselves agreed to participate in the evaluation ($N = 66$).

The school has an enrollment of slightly more than 1,500 students, a majority of whom are non-Hispanic White (61%) or Asian/Pacific Islander (28%). Only 6% of the student body is African American and fewer than 5% are Hispanic or of other race/ethnic backgrounds. At the time of the study, few students (3%) qualified for free/reduced lunch, a commonly used proxy indicator of family poverty.

Study participants were 55% non-Hispanic White, 39% Asian (primarily second-generation Chinese and Asian Indian), and 4% Other. A majority of parents reported annual incomes greater than \$100,000 (83%) and having completed college or obtained a graduate degree (90%). Only nine parents reported incomes less than \$100,000 and of these, six reported annual incomes between \$75,000–100,000. Because only one parent reported low family income (i.e., between \$25,000–50,000) we elected to include all available data for the study analyses. Demographics of the student body (i.e., primarily middle to upper middle-class) align with those of adults and older adolescents shown to be most likely to endorse negative stereotypes about the poor and least likely to endorse government support for the poor (e.g., Appelbaum 2001; Cozzarelli et al. 2002; Seider 2011).

Procedure

Questionnaires assessing students' attitudes and beliefs about poverty, government responsibility, and economic equality were administered three times: approximately 1 week before the curriculum (baseline), 1 week post-instruction, and 6 months post-instruction. Students completed the same questionnaire all three times and always in their classrooms. Baseline and 1 week post-instruction questionnaires were distributed by the second author; the 6 months post-instruction questionnaire was distributed by the students' regular social studies teacher (fourth author). Parents also completed a brief socio-demographic questionnaire.

Poverty Curriculum Implementation

To maximize ecological validity, the 1-week curriculum was integrated into the yearly social studies curriculum. All sections were taught by the students' regular social studies teacher. The second author conducted classroom observations during the lessons, across all six sections, to monitor consistency in implementation across sections and students' responses to instruction. Each class session lasted 45 min.

We elected to use a quasi-experimental within-subject, pretest–posttest design with the students' regular teacher (rather than a control classroom with a different teacher) to control for curriculum fidelity, teacher variability, and teaching effectiveness. We acknowledge that our decision to do so detracts somewhat from our ability to draw causal inferences about the study findings; however, similar methodologies have been used in exploratory intervention studies (e.g., Canavera et al. 2009).

One component of the lesson plan included conveying factual information about poverty. The teacher led a

discussion about the definition of poverty, whether poverty exists in the US, and how poor people in America are classified. Students discussed the federal poverty line and how it is used to determine official poverty status. For example, students learned the percentage of the US population classified as living in poverty and the percentage of poor children. As a class, students made a budget based on the federal poverty level, thinking about what necessities are needed each month. The goal of the budget making activity was for students to see how little money a person living in poverty has and how quickly this money goes towards necessities.

The attention given to promoting students' perspective taking and empathy toward the poor was a recurring theme throughout the lessons. During another lesson, students played the "Poor Me" Poverty game, in which students have a limited number of resources/currency points (based on number of Skittles) and must reach certain goals (that cost a certain number of Skittles). The primary goal of the game was to focus on the cycle of poverty and the inherent difficulties associated with escaping poverty. A secondary goal of the game was to experience some of the frustration of living in poverty. The game is designed so students receive enough points to maintain interest in the game, but not enough points to keep them out of poverty. The class started the game with a certain number of currency points. If a student called out the required number of cards without revealing a poverty (P) or natural disaster (ND) card, the class received a currency point. If a P card appeared, they lost a currency point, if a ND card appeared they lost 2 points, and if an inheritance (I) card appeared they gained 2 points. Additional "neutral" cards could be drawn during the game, including a television, pig, cow, corn, car, house, and medical cards. After playing the game, the class discussion addressed issues such as the frustration of trying to acquire more currency points but not always being able to do so and the range of emotions they experienced during the game. Students were also asked to reflect on a scenario in which their life followed the pattern of the game and if it would be difficult to maintain hope with such an uncertain future.

In addition to promoting perspective taking and empathy, a second theme throughout the curriculum highlighted the multiple and complex reasons why people are poor. For example, students spent considerable time discussing, both in small groups and as a class, the causes and consequences of poverty. A sampling of the potential causes generated by students (as recorded during classroom observations) included lack of education, lack of material possessions, limited employment, lack of natural resources, natural disasters, and immigration. Consequences discussed included less protection from crime and abuse, lack of necessities, health problems, psychological well-being, and

political disenfranchisement. A goal of the discussion was to broaden students' thinking about the multitude of ways by which people become poor and the absence of a single or dominant explanation. Another activity involved exploring potential structural explanations for poverty. Students worked in groups to create graphs of people in poverty, examined poverty statistics by race/ethnicity, and discussed the link between race and poverty. Students learned to distinguish between the number of people of a specific race/ethnic group in poverty compared to the total number of people of that race/ethnic group. Students discussed potential explanations for the disproportionate number of African American and Latinos in poverty, including issues of institutional discrimination and bias.

Measures

Beliefs About Poverty

Participants were asked to rate, "How easy do you think it is to become poor?" (1 = *extremely difficult to become poor*; 10 = *very easy to become poor*). Next, students were asked to respond to the question "How does someone become poor?" These open-ended responses were coded to determine early adolescents' reasoning about poverty, using an iterative process. Team members read over the surveys and developed an exhaustive set of categories, which were then collapsed into a smaller set of categories. A total of 25% of the responses were double-coded and inter-rater reliability estimates were calculated (Cohen's Kappa > .80 across all three time points). Responses were coded and aggregated into four summary categories based on whether they referred to (1) *fatalistic factors* (e.g., "they can be misfortunate, born into a poor family," "born into a poor country," "if they are sick," "disaster," "robbery"), (2) *individualistic factors* (e.g., "buying something you can't afford," "gambling," "by not making the right choice, being poor is their consequence," "doesn't work or doesn't manage their money well," "by not working hard and diligently"), (3) *structural/societal factors* (e.g., "making a salary below the poverty line," "invest all of your money in a business that crashes," "they can become poor by the location they live in," "if somebody's source of income disappears and they can't find a new one, then they probably will become poor"), or (4) *Other/non-specific* (e.g., "by losing all their money," "gets fired from job"), wherein a specific attribution could not be identified and coded. The coding scheme was derived from one used originally by Feagin (1972), and more recently by Flanagan and Tucker (1999), to assess adults' and adolescents' lay beliefs about the causes of poverty. This methodology is consistent with research on adults' and college students' beliefs about economic inequality (Bullock et al. 2003; Seider et al. 2010).

Beliefs About Governmental Responsibility to Help the Poor and Provide Services

Participants were first asked, “Do you think the government has a responsibility to help the poor? (yes/no)”. Next, students indicated their agreement, on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), with a series of 6 statements about the government’s responsibility in providing specific services. An exploratory factor analysis, using promax rotation, of the items asked at baseline yielded a three factor solution, with eigenvalues above 1. All of the loadings were above .78 and the solution explained 78% of the variance. The first factor, labeled *general financial security* consisted of 3 items (e.g., “If people lose their jobs, the government should support them until they find new jobs”). The second factor was labeled *health services and security* (2 items, e.g., “The government should provide basic services such as health and legal services to everyone, free of charge”). And, the third factor consisted of a single item—“The government should make sure all children can attend a *good school*.” This factor structure was applied across three time points and demonstrated adequate reliability (general financial security: α 's = .75, .73, .75; health services and security: inter-item r 's = .44, .47, .43 at baseline, 1 week post-instruction, and 6 months post-instruction, respectively).

Beliefs About Equality and Success in America

To assess general attitudes about equality, participants indicated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) to two items: “It’s not right for there to be rich and poor people in society. There should be more equality,” and “It’s only natural to have rich and poor people in a society.” Responses to the second item were reverse coded so that higher scores across both items reflected stronger support for more equality and responses across both items were averaged (inter-item r 's = .38, .23, .46 at baseline, 1 week post-instruction, and 6 month post-instruction, respectively).

Students were asked, “Does everyone in America have the same opportunity to succeed? (yes/no).” In addition, they rated the importance, on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), of 11 individual and societal/structural factors as determinants of success in America. Students were asked, “In your opinion, how do people in America become successful? How important do you think (fill in) is for helping people succeed in America?” An exploratory factor analysis, using promax rotation, of the items asked at baseline yielded a three factor solution, with eigenvalues above 1. The solution explained 62% of the variance. With the exception of two items—“having enough jobs for work”; “getting help from the government

when needed”—there was little evidence of cross-loading across factors. Removing these two items improved the overall factor structure (all loadings above .70) and explained variance (69%). The first factor asked about the importance of being a *member of ethnic minority* (3 items; e.g., “being Asian”, “being Black”). The second factor focused on *individual effort* (3 items; e.g., “working hard”), and the third factor emphasized *White male privilege* (3 items; “being White”, “being a boy/man”, “being born into wealth”). We aggregated responses to the two items about jobs and getting help from the government to form a fourth *structural/societal* factor. The four factor structure was applied across three time points and demonstrated adequate reliability (ethnic minority status: α 's = .77, .87, .65; individual effort: α 's = .70, .80, .35; White, male privilege: α 's = .69, .69, .81; structural/societal: inter-item r 's = .35, .49, .42 at baseline, 1 week post-instruction, and 6 month post-instruction, respectively). The one exception was reliability for the individual effort scale score at the 6 month post-instruction assessment (α = .35). To preserve consistency in the factor structures across time, we elected to include this scale score in the analysis but acknowledge that null findings may in part be due to measurement error.

Results

Overview of Analysis Plan

For each dependent variable on a Likert scale or proportion score, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for significant changes in students’ beliefs about poverty and inequality before and after the curriculum (comparing baseline, 1 week post-instruction, and 6 months post-instruction). All significant ANOVAs were followed by paired samples t tests to examine whether there were changes from pre-instruction to post-instruction, and whether the changes were maintained in the longer term. For dichotomous variables (e.g., yes/no responses), Chi-squares were analyzed, using the McNemar test of significance for binominal distributions. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all of the study variables at baseline, 1 week post-test, and 6 month post-test.

Changes in Students’ Beliefs About Poverty

In response to the question about how easy it is to become poor, the repeated measures ANOVA was marginally significant, $F(2,60) = 2.42$, $p < 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Follow-up t tests indicated that students perceived it to be easier to become poor immediately after instruction than before,

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all study variables ($N = 66$)

| | Time point | | |
|--|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Baseline M (%) (SD) | Post-1 week M (%) (SD) | Post-6 months M (%) (SD) |
| Attributions for poverty | | | |
| How easy do you think it is for someone to become poor? (1 = extremely difficult; 10 = very easy) | 6.35 (2.00) | 6.90* (2.21) | 6.57 (2.07) |
| Coded responses to prompt, “how does someone become poor?” | | | |
| Proportion of fatalistic attributions | 0.18 (0.23) | 0.46** (0.32) | 0.32* (0.31) |
| Proportion of individualistic attributions | 0.36 (0.35) | 0.20* (0.29) | 0.25* (0.31) |
| Proportion of structural/societal attributions | 0.06 (0.14) | 0.07 (0.19) | 0.03 (0.12) |
| Proportion of other/non-specific attributions | 0.40 (0.36) | 0.27 (0.32) | 0.40 (0.36) |
| Governmental responsibility for aid to the poor and provision of services | | | |
| Do you think the government has a responsibility to help the poor? (0 = no; 1 = yes) | 0.80 (0.40) | 0.84 (0.34) | 0.76 (0.42) |
| The government should provide general financial security (3 items) (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | 2.89 (0.95) | 3.15* (0.80) | 3.18* (0.86) |
| The government should provide health services and security (2 items) (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | 3.42 (0.98) | 3.54 (1.05) | 3.53 (0.87) |
| The government should make sure all children can attend a good school (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | 3.60 (1.13) | 3.62 (1.13) | 3.79 (1.14) |
| Beliefs about equality and success in America | | | |
| There should be more equality in society (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | 2.62 (1.02) | 2.58 (0.85) | 2.44 (0.88) |
| Does everyone in American have the same opportunity to succeed? (0 = no; 1 = yes) | 0.33 (0.47) | 0.12*** (0.33) | 0.22 (0.42) |
| Factors contributing to individual success in America (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important) | | | |
| Ethnic minority status (3 items) | 1.40 (0.80) | 1.47 (0.81) | 1.57 (0.93) |
| Individual effort (3 items) | 4.39 (0.68) | 4.31 (0.77) | 4.48 (0.49) |
| White male privilege (3 items) | 2.00 (0.87) | 2.27* (0.96) | 2.23* (1.08) |
| Structural/societal factors (2 items) | 2.80 (0.84) | 3.09* (0.95) | 2.94 (0.84) |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, *** $p < .0001$ for differences between baseline and post-instruction assessments

$t(64) = -2.19, p < .05$, but this effect was not sustained across the 6-month follow-up period, $t(64) = -0.81, ns$.

Analyses also examined students’ open-ended responses about the causes of poverty. First, to control for variation in the number of responses provided by any given student, proportion scores were created for each response type (i.e., individualistic, fatalistic, structural/social, other/non-specific). Next, two repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted on the proportion of (a) individualistic causes and (b) fatalistic causes given by students. The low frequency of structural/societal causes precluded their analysis (see Table 1).

Results indicated an increase in students’ reference to fatalistic causes post-instruction, $F(2, 59) = 4.95, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.46$. Follow-up tests indicated that this effect was observed 1-week following instruction, $t(63) = -7.36,$

$p < .001$, and sustained across the 6-month follow-up period, $t(61) = -2.90, p < .05$. Results also indicated a decrease in students’ emphasis on individualistic causes post-instruction, $F(2, 59) = 4.16, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.12$. Follow-up tests indicated that this effect was observed at both the 1-week, $t(63) = 3.19, p < .05$, and 6-month follow-up assessments, $t(61) = 2.10, p < .05$.

Changes in Students’ Beliefs about Governmental Responsibility to Help the Poor and Provide Services

In general, most students ($\geq 76\%$) agreed with the statement that the government has a responsibility to help the poor, and their belief did not change as a function of the curriculum implementation, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 18.22, ns$ and 5.48, ns . The lack of change is likely due to the

high levels of endorsement of government responsibility observed across all three time points.

We observed some evidence of change in students' more targeted beliefs about the government's responsibility to provide services. Specifically, results from the repeated measures ANOVA indicated a marginally significant increase in students' endorsement of the government's role in providing financial support, $F(2, 59) = 2.71, p < 0.10, \eta^2 = 0.08$. Follow-up tests indicated that this effect was observed 1 week post-instruction, $t(63) = -2.44, p < .05$, and was sustained across the 6-month follow-up period, $t(61) = -2.17, p < .05$. No changes were observed in students' beliefs about the government's responsibility to provide health services and security, $F(2, 58) = 0.97, ns, \eta^2 = 0.03$, and education services, $F(2, 59) = 0.97, ns, \eta^2 = 0.03$.

Changes in Students' Beliefs About Equality and Success in America

Students were asked how strongly they agreed with statements advocating for more equality in society. The repeated measures ANOVA indicated no change in students' beliefs in the need for more equality in the US following the curriculum instruction, $F(2, 57) = 0.93, ns, \eta^2 = 0.07$. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, students across time points did not endorse a need for more equality between the rich and poor in society.

In contrast, participants' responses indicated recognition of the fact that not everyone has an equal chance to succeed in America. The percentage of students responding *yes* to the question, "Does everyone in America have the same opportunity to succeed?" decreased immediately following instruction, $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 18.33, p < .000$, but this effect was not sustained across the 6-month follow up period, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 19.54, ns$.

The curriculum appeared to be somewhat more successful in altering student beliefs about factors important to an individual's success in America. Significant changes were observed for two of the three non-individualistic factors: White male privilege, $F(2, 59) = 6.65, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.18$, and societal/structural, $F(2, 57) = 5.96, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.17$. Specifically, students rated White male privilege as significantly more important to being successful 1 week following instruction, $t(63) = -2.80, p < .05$, and this effect was sustained across the 6-month follow-up period, $t(61) = -2.40, p < .05$. Students also rated structural/societal factors as significantly more important to being successful 1 week post-instructions, $t(61) = -2.88, p < .05$, but this effect was not sustained across the 6-month follow-up, $t(61) = -1.03, ns$. We observed no change across the study period in early adolescents' ratings of the importance of ethnic minority

status, $F(2, 57) = 0.94, ns, \eta^2 = 0.06$, and individual effort, $F(2, 60) = 0.96, ns, \eta^2 = 0.04$, as contributors to success in America.

Discussion

Over the past 30 years, the United States has become increasingly polarized economically. Between 1979 and 2009 families in the top quintile of the income distribution experienced 49% income growth while those in the bottom quintile (i.e., the poorest families) saw their real income shrink by 7.4% (Economic Policy Institute 2011). The unequal distribution of wealth and the growing tide of economic inequality in the United States touches the lives of all members of society, including its young people. Scientific evidence of the detrimental effects of poverty and economic hardship on development is robust (McLoyd et al. 2006). Research, however, investigating youths' reasoning about the causes of poverty and economic inequality and the implications of such beliefs for their stance on policies to redress inequity or assist the disadvantaged remains understudied. Furthermore, while there is a growing body of research examining the impact of service learning and other curriculum efforts on high school and college students' reasoning about inequality and attitudes toward marginalized groups such as the poor and homeless, we are not aware of any curriculum-based intervention studies conducted with early adolescents. To address this limitation, the current study assessed whether explicit teaching of a social studies lesson about poverty led to shifts in early adolescents' (i.e., 8th grade students) attitudes and beliefs about poverty and economic inequality, both in the short-term (i.e., 1 week after the lesson) and 6 months later. The study was informed by developmental intergroup theory (DIT; Bigler and Liben 2007) and reviews about effective interventions (Aboud and Brown in press), which suggest that both explicit lessons that induce perspective taking and empathy, as well as stories and discussions in class about cross-group friendships, are necessary to reduce and counter stereotypes about stigmatized groups such as the poor. Our decision to focus on early adolescence was informed by theoretical and empirical evidence implicating this developmental period as an important time during which to study attitudes and beliefs about others (Aboud 1988; Brown and Bigler 2005). Namely, early adolescents have the cognitive maturity to make their attitudes about others often biased, yet potentially flexible (Aboud 1988).

Results regarding the success of the curriculum in altering students' beliefs about the poor and about poverty as a social condition are mixed. Students showed consistent and sustained shifts in the causes of poverty and success,

but no changes in their beliefs about government's responsibility to aid the poor. The results are consistent with the basic premise of DIT (Bigler and Liben 2007). Specifically, students' attitudes were affected *only* in the domains that were explicitly discussed in the curriculum (e.g., reasons for poverty and financial success). The curriculum did not specifically address the government's role in alleviating poverty; thus, it was not surprising that students' attitudes were unchanged on this topic. In other words, DIT argues that children only develop biased attitudes toward groups that society, teachers, or parents explicitly or implicitly attend to. The converse implication—which is supported by this study—is that children's attitudes are only changed when they are explicitly attended to by society, teachers, or parents.

Research evaluating the effects of anti-bias curricula informs our understanding of the specific pathways by which the social studies curriculum may have led to a shift in students' beliefs about poverty. More specifically, anti-bias curriculum effects have been shown to affect changes in attitudes, in part, through the arousal of empathy in the participants (Aboud and Brown in press). In the social studies lesson evaluated in the current study, several components were explicitly designed to evoke an emotional response, including both empathy and frustration, in students. This includes the "Poor Me" Poverty game as well as discussion of the federal poverty line and the budget activity. In particular, the "Poor Me" Poverty game involved a simulation for experiencing poverty, perhaps invoking a sense of empathy for those less fortunate. Classroom observations conducted during the instruction period indicated that students were engaged in the game, and frequently referenced the game during subsequent lessons. Furthermore, the game explicitly focused on the fatalistic causes through the "Natural Disaster" and "Inheritance" playing cards. This emphasis corresponds with the more frequent references to inheritance (e.g., someone may be born into a poor family) and uncontrollable events (e.g., poverty is the result of a natural disaster) observed in students' responses to the prompt of "How does someone become poor?" Participation in the "Poor Me" Poverty game, as well as discussions of the poverty line and the family budget, may have also contributed to observed changes in students' perceptions of the ease with which someone can become poor.

Whereas the lesson plan appears to have been successful in reducing students' emphasis on individualistic causes for poverty and increasing their orientation to fatalistic causes of poverty, impacts on students' structural attributions could not be assessed because students made so few references to structural/societal factors across all time points. This was unexpected and in contrast to other studies assessing students' causal reasoning about poverty (see

Flanagan and Tucker 1999; Leahy 1983). We suspect this to be an artifact of how the data were collected (students completed questionnaires at their desk in a group format) and the application of stringent criteria for categorizing a response. Because student responses could not be probed further, there were many instances of incomplete responses for which the primary source could not be determined (e.g., "lost their job"). The problem is not unique to our data. Flanagan and Tucker (1999) report a similar difficulty in their ability to code student's open-ended survey responses.

The study findings also point to inconsistencies in students' beliefs about poverty, success, and inequality. For example, students were less likely to attribute poverty to individualistic causes after explicit learning about poverty and more likely to acknowledge the influence of non-individualistic factors, such as fatalistic events (e.g., born into a poor or wealthy family) as predictors of poverty and success in America. Furthermore, across all three time points, students agreed more strongly that the government has a responsibility to provide the more specific services of health and schooling rather than general financial assistance. Yet, youth also viewed individual effort as a strong determinant of success both prior to and following instruction and viewed economic inequality as an acceptable and natural consequence of society. Consistent with DIT (Bigler and Liben 2007), one possible explanation is that not enough explicit information about the structural causes of economic inequality was included as part of the curriculum. For example, the "Poor Me" Poverty game highlighted fatalistic attributions for poverty and wealth through "Natural Inheritance" and "Inheritance" playing cards, but an equivalent card was not present for societal/structural causes of inequality (e.g., lack of availability of well-paying jobs). Whereas students did discuss the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic/Latino people living in poverty, and how this is related to institutional discrimination and bias, learning about the statistics was not enough to shift students' ideologies about the poor and homeless. Similarly, it seems important to more explicitly address and discuss with young adolescents the juxtaposition of their beliefs about societal responsibility to meet basic needs and their beliefs about meritocracy. Our data suggest that connecting students' beliefs about the role of the government in meeting basic health and education needs may be another entry point for conversations about economic status, inequality, and inequity.

It is also conceivable that students' ideas about the poor were so heavily entrenched in stereotypes that perpetuated the notion of individual responsibility, that simply learning about structural/societal causes of poverty for a week was not enough to alter their perceptions. For example, students were observed making many stereotypical comments (such as referring to poor people as "hobos," "beggars," and

“dumpster divers”) during initial discussions about what it means to be poor and who is more likely to be poor. In response to the teacher’s question about why there are a greater proportion of African Americans in poverty relative to Whites, one student responded, “Because they have a lot of babies.” Another student made a reference to poor people stealing from stores, and several students’ referenced people “living off welfare” and “not looking for a job.” The findings highlight the pervasiveness of negative societal stereotypes about the poor. Students’ stereotypic beliefs may have decreased following the classroom lesson, although they were not assessed in the current study. One important direction for future studies, therefore, is to include an assessment of youths’ awareness and endorsement of stereotypic beliefs.

Overall, it may be that a more intensive, integrated, and sustained approach to teaching about economic inequality is necessary to increase students’ recognition and endorsement of structural reasons for poverty. This is consistent with our findings of students’ endorsement of individual effort as the most important and influential factor for determining success in America. Furthermore, even though students were more likely to acknowledge the influence of structural/societal factors such as being White and male in determining one’s success in America following the lesson, on average students indicated that they viewed these factors as only “somewhat important.” And, overall, students were generally ambivalent in their endorsement of more economic equality in American society.

Results from the current study parallel those from studies conducted with older adolescents demonstrating a tendency to explain and justify inequality by referring to equity, and viewing inequality as inevitable (Chafel 1997; Leahy 1983), especially for individuals with minimal or no direct contact with marginalized and disenfranchised groups (Seider et al. 2010), as was the case in the current study. Indeed, the current study findings are consistent with those from a recent study evaluating the impact of a homelessness curriculum on the attitudes and beliefs about economic inequality of a sample of predominantly White privileged high school students (Seider 2011). Seider reported that whereas students reported more complex beliefs about homelessness following the curriculum, their beliefs about America’s opportunity structure post-intervention ran counter to expectations. Specifically, students justified their own privileged position more strongly following the curriculum by endorsing the existing social class structure as legitimate, inevitable, or a combination of the two. Such findings suggest that conversations about poverty and economic inequality with students from more privileged backgrounds may be more impactful if they are meaningfully connected to discussions about their own

(and their family’s) socioeconomic position, including the role of factors beyond an individual’s control (i.e., fatalistic, structural), and explicit talk about power and privilege as well as institutional bias and discrimination (Brown and Bigler 2005).

Acknowledging societal factors as contributing to one’s socioeconomic position comes with the recognition that one may not have achieved everything based on individual merit. Although students in the current study did attend to such factors when thinking about what it takes to be successful in America, it is not clear how much they attributed their own and their family’s success to societal factors as well as individual factors such as effort and ability. Flanagan and Tucker (1999) find that among older adolescents, beliefs and attitudes about inequality and success are influenced by one’s own socioeconomic position. Determining if this is true during early adolescence is especially relevant given that developing a healthy social identity (who one is and one’s place and status in society) is a hallmark of adolescence. For the upper middle-class youth in the current study, all of whom were high achievers as demonstrated by their enrollment in the honors social studies course, the dissonance created by accepting that success is not merely the product of individual ability and effort but also circumstances and opportunities beyond one’s own control could have been potentially threatening to their sense of self, and reinforced beliefs about the current social structure, including inequality, as fair and legitimate. Such system justifying beliefs—a “set of social, cognitive, and motivational tendencies to preserve the status quo through ideological means, especially when it involves rationalizing inequality among social groups” (Jost 2001, p. 101) have been shown to be powerful predictors of group identification processes among college students, but have not yet been investigated in studies with children and adolescents. Findings indicate that, for members of high-status groups, being able to justify the way things are and perceiving the existing social arrangement as fair, legitimate, and perhaps even inevitable is associated with higher levels of ingroup favoritism and self-esteem (Jost 2001).

Study Strengths, Caveats, and Implications

The current study makes an important contribution to the literature. Findings suggest that DIT (Bigler and Liben 2007), which has previously focused on gender and racial discrimination and prejudice, can be extended to issues of economic inequality. In addition, as far as we know, the current study is one of the only studies to systematically evaluate the effects of a lesson to teach younger adolescents about economic inequality. The findings highlight that, whereas a social studies lesson explicitly focused on

addressing the causes and consequences of poverty can alter students' beliefs about poverty in targeted areas, it was less successful in shifting students' attitudes about the determinants of success or views about economic (in) equality in general. Given the relatively short duration of the curriculum (1-week), these findings are not entirely surprising. As aptly shown by social psychologists, attitude change is notoriously difficult (e.g., Pfeifer et al. 2007). It is noteworthy that we demonstrated even modest change in beliefs among a demographic group least likely to have any direct contact people who are poor and who, as adults, are also most likely to endorse the *Protestant Work Ethic* and to be least supportive of government efforts to redress social and economic inequity. Thus, as their attitudes and beliefs are arguably the most difficult to change, evidence of even modest change is encouraging. This is particularly true when the findings are compared alongside the medium-size effect findings reported by Seider et al. (2010) in their evaluation of the arguably more intensive and multifaceted *Pulse Program* discussed in the Introduction to this article; a program explicitly designed to "educate our students about social injustice by putting them into direct contact with marginalized communities ... and by encouraging discussion on classic and contemporary works of philosophy and theology" (p. 216).

Although the current study was conducted in one school, one grade level, and with one teacher (but across multiple classrooms), it is important to highlight that it was conducted in an ecologically-valid manner. The topic was integrated into the existing social studies curriculum (i.e., Georgia state history) in a manner that made sense and did not seem at odds with what students were already studying. Another strength of the study design was the inclusion of multiple post-instruction follow-ups. Inclusion of multiple assessments following an intervention is not typical in the prejudice-reduction intervention literature (Pfeifer et al. 2007) but necessary to understanding the longer term impacts.

A limitation is the absence of a true control group (i.e., students not exposed to the curriculum instruction). As stated earlier, for this study we elected to go with a quasi-experimental design and to work with a single teacher. We recognize that this compromises our ability to draw causal inferences from our data and have been cautious in this regard. Our aim is that this initial study encourages future research on economic inequality with young children, including more thorough evaluations of intervention efforts to combat stereotypes about poverty and expand understanding about economic inequality. A second limitation of the current study is that we were unable to determine which component—fostering understanding of the causes of poverty, building empathy for those living in poverty, or a combination of both components—was responsible for changes observed in students' attitudes and beliefs. To

better isolate pathways of change, future evaluations should aim to manipulate and assess the effectiveness of individual components relative to each other as well as a control condition.

Conclusion

Despite a general discomfort with talking about it, classism and economic stratification are essential features of US society. In the absence of explicit conversations with parents, educators, and other adults, children and youth view poverty and inequality as uncomfortable topics that are best avoided and sometimes considered taboo. Developmental theory indicates that this is inherently problematic and may lead young people to form biased and often times inaccurate perceptions of and attributions about those living in poverty; biases and perceptions that may lead them to discriminate against the poor and as adults be less likely to support policies and programs to assist the disadvantaged. Findings from the current study suggest that curriculum efforts to educate young adolescents about the complexities and experiences of poverty can be effective mechanisms by which to change beliefs rooted in individual responsibility and blame for the victim. Specifically, we found that after explicitly learning about poverty, students showed greater recognition that factors outside of an individual's control can play a role in determining one's socioeconomic position. Findings point to the possibilities and potential of implementing lessons about inequality in the classroom.

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