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Redistribution Preferences and Low Socioeconomic Status

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Synonyms

Wealth reallocation; Voluntary redistribution; Wealth transfers; Income transfer; Socioeconomic flattening; Redistribution of resources; Economically vulnerable; Lower classes; Working class; Working poor; Impoverish; Destitute; Uneducated; Undereducated; Unemployed; Underemployed; Status; Low social status

Definition

Low SES. Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to a person's income, education, and occupation, some combination of which determines her overall social standing. The relevant markers of social standing will vary across communities and cultures, but researchers afford these three variables special attention given their centrality to the increasingly global market system. A person with low SES will

rank toward the bottom of their community's income, education, and/or occupational prestige distributions.

Economic Redistribution. Although seemingly straightforward, economic redistribution – altering the prevailing allocation of some economic good or token among a population – is a dangerously vague term, open to political exploitation, and the root of much jumbled thinking. Take, for example, the 2003 Bush tax cuts, which experts and most Americans recognized as a massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. It was an economic redistribution, but not of the kind people usually mean when they talk about such efforts. Even if we limit the definition to those undertakings that give *from* them-that-have to them-that-don't (as is the case in this entry), we are still a long way from covering our bases. Private charitable donations and centrally run progressive tax schemes are worlds apart on the political spectrum and require totally different justifications and institutions. Experimentalists often record voluntary transfers of money between subjects, whereas public opinion scholars (on whose work we focus here) tend to measure survey respondents' self-reported attitudes toward government programs and tax policies. There are occasions when discussing economic redistribution *broadly* is reasonable, even preferable (review articles with strict word limits among them), but this should be done with great care in academic and policy settings. Whenever possible, specify:

Redistribution of what, among whom and along what lines, facilitated how?

Introduction

Socioeconomic status has a clear-cut but surprisingly subdued relationship with redistributive preferences. Supporting economic redistribution stands to directly benefit people of low SES, and low SES individuals are empirically more supportive of and more likely to participate in redistributive measures, but not to the extent that most researchers would expect.

The Influence of SES on Redistributive Preferences

Individuals with less money, less education, and less work have clear incentives to be, and statistically are, more favorable toward redistributive efforts than those with more. Tied up with each SES component are perceptions of socioeconomic mobility – the timing and apparent flexibility of SES. See Alesina and Giuliano (2011) for an extended introduction to the information provided in this section.

Income

The more money you take in, the less you support economic redistribution. (The language associated with income acquisition is tricky. I say ‘take in’ here because *earn* implies that wages are proportional to merit and secured through direct action on the part of the employee, and that automatically imbues the transaction with a moral quality. Such words identify the income as deserved *prima facie*, and that can influence people’s willingness to redistribute it.) Income is a statistically dependable predictor of redistributive preferences and behavior, and its substantive influence is on par with that of education.

Education

The amount and pedigree of schooling serve simultaneously as markers of social prestige and determinants of economic mobility. In this light

it is unsurprising that, all else equal, individuals with more formal education are consistently more opposed to economic redistribution. If schooling is (in part) an investment in future consumption, individuals making that investment will not want to part with its dividends. (This is not to say that all people are equally able to invest in their educations.) But this finding flies in the face of the popular conception of the socially progressive by-products of higher education. That is because schooling and ideology have an *interactive* relationship when it comes to redistribution, whereby “the effect of education reinforces that of political orientation” (Alesina and Giuliano 2011, p. 107). More years of schooling make self-identified left-wingers more supportive of redistribution, but taken by itself, education promises future economic and social prospects and therefore a disincentive to redistribute.

Employment

Unemployed individuals are more open to redistribution than are their employed compatriots, though this relationship does not consistently achieve statistical significance. There is evidence that the American unemployed feel less defined by or trapped in their unemployment compared to the out-of-work in other nations, where unemployment can be a more dependable prognosticator of policy preferences. More reliably associated with support for redistribution is a *history* of unemployment and personal traumas of the kind that cause or directly result from trying financial situations, although the magnitudes of these explanatory variables are relatively meager. Individuals who experience and remember such negative shocks appear to learn from their ordeals, tempering their optimism about upward socioeconomic mobility and lessening their aversion to wealth reallocation in case the dice ever again roll against their favor.

Perceived Mobility and Personal Narrative

Personal SES trajectory is a double-edged sword. Whereas experiences earning a low income, being unemployed, and undergoing financial trauma as an adult induce an individual to favor redistribution, growing up in a family that experienced such

trials may encourage a person to *disfavor* redistribution *if* they are relatively better off now. For example, individuals who enjoy higher occupational prestige than their parents are prone to oppose redistribution. The most prevalent explanation for this and related findings is that people who outpace the SES into which they were born are optimistic about upward socioeconomic mobility and will not want to threaten potential future economic gains by backing redistribution in the present. In addition to this strategic positioning, it may also be that someone who came from a low-SES household is invested in maintaining – both internally and in public – a personal narrative in which they overcame adversity and are therefore less willing to part with their hard-fought gains. That is, they may feel (and may need to feel) especially *deserving* of their improved SES and its attending financial benefits, and are therefore less willing to part with them (more on this later).

Explaining SES's Subdued Influence on Redistribution

While theoretically and statistically solid, the substantive connection between SES and distributive preferences is perplexingly meager. For example, a majority of the American poor deem the prevailing economic system “basically fair” (Jost et al. 2003) and back what they know to be self-harming, regressive economic policies (Bartels 2008). Why don't low-SES individuals support redistribution more vigorously and in greater numbers? There are several contending explanations, all of which need to better account for one another. See Bower-Bir (2014, appendix B) for an extended overview of prevailing explanations.

Greed and Optimism

The chattering class's favorite explanation holds that people on the lower rungs oppose shortening the socioeconomic ladder because they are confident that they will eventually climb it. That optimism, however, is neither excessive nor does it extend far into the future. Low-SES Americans, for example, have more-or-less reasonable

definitions of and expectations regarding personal income and wealth. More to the point, they are not overly concerned with achieving wealth, focusing instead on financial stability. And however sanguine they are about their own financial futures, they are not overly so about their children's.

Neoliberal Intellection

Some economists posit that low-SES redistributive skepticism is farsighted. In wanting to grow the economic pie and their (relatively slender) slice of it, low-SES individuals may shun redistributive measures for fear they generate disincentives to work, save, and invest. This stance would be personally uncomfortable in the short term but might lead to widespread, long-term gains for everyone. But not only are such neoclassical arguments generally unpopular among low-SES populations, people of all socioeconomic backgrounds are decidedly myopic in appraising economic policies (Page and Shapiro 1992; Bartels 2008).

Confusion

Rather than economically, political scientists fear that the poor think incoherently. Scarcity of key dietary, social, and economic resources can temporarily, and in some cases permanently, impair a person's cognitive abilities (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Add to that redistribution's complexity, especially at the policy level where tax and welfare laws are negotiated outside of the public's view and in highly technical language. Low-SES citizens may not fully grasp issues like tax incidence, and their policy preferences are backward because of it. Moreover, low-SES populations may be hoodwinked into supporting regressive, self-detrimental policies through targeted, prolonged political and media promotions (Bartels 2008; Page and Shapiro 1992). Although powerful forces, ignorance and manipulation do not entirely account for people's puzzling redistribution preferences (Lupia et al. 2006).

Delusion

An influential set of psychological models known as “just world” or “system justification” theories postulate an automatic and near-universal human

need to believe in the fairness of outcomes and/or processes: that people get what they deserve and vice versa. The basic notion is that “living in an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and capriciously unjust world would be unbearably threatening, and so we cling defensively to the illusion that the world is a just place” (Jost et al. 2003, p. 58). This reaction is apparently facilitated through conscious and nonconscious means and may persist whether the mentally insufferable transgression is directed at one’s self or others.

Natural Justice

Combining insights from institutional economics and moral philosophy, researchers who study justice as a natural phenomenon find that people will tolerate psychologically troubling and financially detrimental economic distributions if they judge those distributions *deserved* (Bower-Bir 2014). Indeed, redistribution in such cases would be unjust, taking from the deserving and giving to the undeserving. People are not preoccupied with justice because they are moral, per se, but because moral concepts like economic justice and deservingness are *social institutions*, (Binmore 2011) and violating institutional boundaries is expensive, inviting internally and externally inflicted costs such as guilt and ostracism. Rather than the universal, intuitive definition of fairness that psychologists often seek (e.g., Starmans et al. 2017), natural justice scholars treat desert as *emergent*, fashioned over repeated interactions among humans trying to allocate all manner of goods, treatments, and duties. Definitions of desert vary across communities and resources, but often with common elements. An individual’s willingness to redistribute, then, depends on her definition of economic desert – which may preclude specific redistributive avenues – and the degree to which she thinks economic desert is currently rewarded (Bower-Bir 2014).

Conclusion

The above-detailed approaches likely complement one another, applying to specific situations

and populations. Multiple researchers conclude, for example, that individuals must perceive inequality as undeserved before they are willing to combat it (e.g., Bower-Bir 2014; Starmans et al. 2017). The next question is not whether but *when* and *for whom* is this willingness driven by socially evolved norms, as the natural justice contingent contends, and when is it driven by a deep-seated aversion to inborn conceptions of injustice, as psychologists posit? Similarly, rather than wonder at and bemoan citizen ignorance and delusion, political scientists might uncover specific aspects of redistributive policy that confuse and frighten people. People of all backgrounds respond to social, psychological, and personal pressures, and plenty of parties peddle economic ignorance and fantasy. Rather than focusing on one angle of attack, researchers must cross disciplines to fully rectify the straightforward but empirically muted support for economic redistribution among the lower socioeconomic strata.

Finally, a warning: The theories introduced in this article use ancient and nuanced terms like justice, fairness, and desert, often cavalierly. (For a preliminary untangling of these closely related terms, see Bower-Bir (2014, Chap. 2). Briefly, justice is getting what one deserves. Desert is the meriting of some treatment or resource, and the concept itself bridges the myriad and otherwise isolated notions of fairness.) Scholars from all disciplines are guilty, but those from the brain sciences – in their quest to uncover innate moral principles – are especially susceptible. For example, psychologists Starmans et al. (2017) acknowledge that their predecessors speciously equate *just* and *equal* outcomes, only to themselves conflate *fair* and *equitable* processes, the latter being one of many possible flavors of the former. Similarly, neuroscientists Decety et al. (2015) tacitly advance a definition of *just* behavior as *altruistic* behavior. Take care not to overreach, believing your favored definition of a moral concept to be *the* definition of that concept. Social scientists ignore one another and moral philosophers at their own peril (Binmore 2011).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Economic Decisions](#)
- ▶ [Evolution and the Theory of Games](#)
- ▶ [Evolution of Morality](#)
- ▶ [Evolved Moral Foundations](#)
- ▶ [Game Theory](#)
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- ▶ [Self-deception](#)
- ▶ [Social Status and Economic Resources](#)
- ▶ [Status and Redistribution of Resources](#)
- ▶ [Unemployed](#)

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