

How Wealth Reduces Compassion

As riches grow, empathy for others seems to decline

By Daisy Grewal on April 10, 2012, *Scientific American*

Note: "Compassion" means caring about others.

1. Who is more likely to lie, cheat, and steal—the poor person or the rich one? It's tempting to think that the wealthier you are, the more likely you are to act fairly. After all, if you already have enough for yourself, it's easier to think about what others may need. But research suggests the opposite is true: as people climb the social ladder, their compassionate feelings towards other people decline.

2. Psychologists Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner ran several studies looking at whether social class influences how much we care about the feelings of others. In one study, Piff and his colleagues observed the behaviour of drivers at a busy four-way crossroads. They found that luxury car drivers were more likely to cut off other motorists instead of waiting for their turn. In a different study they found that luxury car drivers were also more likely to speed past a pedestrian trying to use a crosswalk, even after making eye contact with the pedestrian.

3. Piff and his colleagues ran a study where they manipulated people's class feelings. The researchers asked participants to spend a few minutes comparing themselves either to people better off or worse off than themselves financially. Afterwards, participants were shown a jar of candy and told that they could take home as much as they wanted. They were also told that the leftover candy would be given to children in a nearby laboratory. Those participants who had spent time thinking about how much better off they were compared to others ended up taking significantly more candy for themselves—leaving less behind for the children.

4. But why would wealth and status decrease our feelings of compassion for others? Piff and his colleagues suspect that the answer may have something to do with how wealth



and abundance give us a sense of freedom and independence from others. The less we have to rely on others, the less we may care about their feelings. This leads us towards being more self-focused. Another reason has to do with our attitudes towards greed. Piff and his colleagues found that wealthier people are more likely to agree with statements that greed is justified, beneficial, and morally defensible.

5. Given the growing income inequality in the United States, the relationship between wealth and compassion has important implications. Those who hold most of the power in this country, political and otherwise, tend to come from privileged backgrounds. If social class influences how much we care about others, then the most powerful among us may be the least likely to make decisions that help the needy and the poor. Although greed is a universal human emotion, it may have the strongest pull over those of who already have the most.