Lower classes quicker to show compassion in the face of suffering

By Yasmin Anwar, Media Relations | December 19, 2011

BERKELEY —
Emotional differences between the rich and poor, as depicted in such Charles Dickens classics as "A Christmas Carol" and "A Tale of Two Cities," may have a scientific basis. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, have found that people in the lower socio-economic classes are more physiologically attuned to suffering, and quicker to express compassion than their more affluent counterparts.

By comparison, the UC Berkeley study found that individuals in the upper middle and upper classes were less able to detect and respond to the distress signals of others. Overall, the results indicate that socio-economic status correlates with the level of empathy and compassion that people show in the face of emotionally charged situations.

"It's not that the upper classes are coldhearted," said UC Berkeley social psychologist Jennifer Stellar, lead author of the study published online on Dec. 12 in the journal, *Emotion*. "They may just not be as adept at recognizing the cues and signals of suffering because they haven't had to deal with as many obstacles in their lives."

Stellar and her colleagues' findings challenge previous studies that have characterized lower-class people as being more prone to anxiety and hostility in the face of adversity.

"These latest results indicate that there's a culture of compassion and cooperation among lower-class individuals that may be born out of threats to their wellbeing," Stellar said.

It has not escaped the researchers' attention that the findings come at a time of rising class tension, expressed in the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Rather than widen the class divide, Stellar said she would like to see the findings promote understanding of different class cultures. For example, the findings suggest that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds may thrive better in cooperative settings than their upper-class

counterparts.

“Upper-class individuals appear to be more self-focused, they’ve grown up with more freedom and autonomy,” she said. “They may do better in an individualist, competitive environment.”

More than 300 ethnically diverse young adults were recruited for the UC Berkeley study, which was divided into three experiments that used three separate groups of participants. Because all the volunteers were college undergraduates, their class identification – lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class or upper class – was based on parental income and education.

In the first experiment, 148 young adults were rated on how frequently and intensely they experience such emotions as joy, contentment, pride, love, compassion, amusement and awe. In addition, they reported how much they agreed with such statements as “When I see someone hurt or in need, I feel a powerful urge to take care of them,” and “I often notice people who need help.” Compassion was the only positive emotion reported at greater levels by lower-class participants, the study found.

In the second experiment, a new group of 64 participants viewed two videos: an instructional video on construction and an emotionally charged video about families who are coping with the challenges of having a child with cancer. Participants showed no differences while watching the “neutral” instructional video, and all reported feeling sad in response to the video about families of cancer patients. However, members of the lower class reported higher levels of compassion and empathy as distinct from sorrow.

The researchers also monitored the heart rates of participants as they watched the neutral and emotionally charged videos. Lower-class participants showed greater decreases in heart rate as they watched the cancer family video than upper-class participants.

“One might assume that watching someone suffering would cause stress and raise the heart rate,” Stellar said. “But we have found that, during compassion, the heart rate lowers as if the body is calming itself to take care of another person.”

Finally, a new set of 106 participants was randomly divided into pairs and pitted against one another in mock interviews for a lab manager position. To further raise the stress level in interviews, those who performed best were to win a cash prize. Post-interview reports from the participants showed that the lower-class interviewees perceived their rivals to be feeling greater amounts of stress, anxiety and embarrassment and as a result reported more compassion and sympathy for their competitors. Conversely, upper-class participants were less able to detect emotional distress signals in their rivals.

“Recognizing suffering is the first step to responding compassionately. The results suggest that it’s not that upper classes don’t care, it’s that they just aren’t as good at perceiving stress or anxiety,” Stellar said.

Other coauthors of the study are UC Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner; Michael Kraus, a postdoctoral fellow in psychiatry at UCSF; and Vida Manzo, a researcher in social psychology at Northwestern University. The study was funded by grants from UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center and the McNair Scholars Program.

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