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Young Children's Reasoning about Children and Families Living in Poverty

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for the degree Master of Arts in Education

by

Lindsey Nenadal

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Young Children's Reasoning about Children and Families Living in Poverty

by

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Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Rashmita S. Mistry, Chair

In a time when millions of children and families are living in poverty, it is vital to understand individuals' causal attributions for poverty and desires to offer assistance to those in need. Research has focused on adults' reasoning about poverty, but less is known about when attitudes originate and how they evolve over time. This study looks at young children's reasoning about children and families living in poverty through a causal attribution lens during a developmental timespan when major socio-cognitive shifts occur. Participants were 86 kindergarten, first, and second grade students. Two socio-cognitive tasks and an interview about beliefs and attitudes about poverty were administered. Findings indicate some significant differences in attributions based on grade level, but not socio-cognitive abilities, as well as an overall desire to help those in need. These results suggest that children's beliefs about poverty shift during the early elementary school years and underscore the need to engage children in developmentally appropriate conversations to ensure they receive accurate information about people living in poverty. Implications and future research are presented.

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Acknowledgments

In the society that is home to the "The American Dream", both success and failure are often attributed to an individual's abilities and efforts. This has led to the widespread belief that wealth and poverty are also within an individual's control, a belief which can feed into the negative perceptions people have of individuals living in poverty (Chafel, 1997; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001) and create less than enthusiastic support for social policies aimed at reducing poverty (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). This can have serious implications, as 16.1 million children lived in poverty in the United States in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

In his 2013 speech about economic mobility, President Barack Obama addressed the lack of support for Americans living in poverty and the importance of addressing this issue when he stated, "The idea that so many children are born into poverty in the wealthiest nation on Earth is heartbreaking enough. But the idea that a child may never be able to escape that poverty because she lacks a decent education or health care, *or a community that views her future as their own*, that should offend all of us and it should compel us to action. We are a better country than this" (Remarks by the President, 2013).

A critical first step in addressing the negative stereotypes that can lead to the lack of social policy support is to better understand the development of ideas and beliefs about causes of poverty. While research has identified trends and themes in adults' reasoning about poverty, less is known about children's beliefs or the ages when attitudes and behaviors originate and how they evolve over time. To address this limitation, the purpose of this study was to look at kindergarten, first, and second grade children's reasoning about children and families living in poverty through a causal attribution lens, while paying particularly close attention to differences in children's thinking across a developmental timespan when major socio-cognitive shifts are occurring. Understanding how children in these early grades think about the causes of poverty can help inform researchers and

teachers about the development of beliefs and attitudes, possible misconceptions that exist, and the time in childhood when conversations about poverty can begin to take place.

Literature Review

The American Dream

In a poll administered by The Pew Charitable Trusts, 70% of American adults agreed that the American dream is "somewhat alive" or "very much alive" today and that getting financially ahead depends more on hard work, skills, and drive than on the economy, job competition, or availability of a good education (Poll Results, 2011). While individual effort and abilities may help some individuals get ahead, structural and social barriers, such as the lack of opportunity for a good education and the lack of available decent paying jobs, can make it extremely difficult to overcome poverty (Gorski, 2012). Yet, the idea of a "permeable" boundary between classes can lead those living in poverty to view their situation not as unjust, but rather as something that can change if they just work a little harder (Williams, 2009). In reality, roughly 42% of children born into the bottom level of the income distribution will likely stay there (Reeves, 2014), which should be of concern to American society, as approximately one in five children under the age of 18 were living in poverty in the United States in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Attribution Theory

While various barriers can make it difficult to transition out of poverty, the attitudes and beliefs of members in society can further hinder this transition. American adults are less likely to support policies aimed at alleviating the effects of poverty when poverty is attributed to individualistic, rather than structural or societal, causes (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Attribution theory suggests that when attempting to understand a situation, such as someone living in poverty, an individual gathers information from various sources to determine what is believed to be the cause of the situation, and this belief then influences accompanying feelings and actions (Weiner, Osborne, &

Rudolph, 2010; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Previous studies that have looked at attributions for poverty have generally categorized causes into a taxonomy that consists of three separate categories: individualistic, structural/societal, and fatalistic (Bullock, 1999; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Leahy, 1983; Mistry, Brown, Chow, & Collins, 2012; Seider, 2011). While these three categories are helpful in broadly classifying perceived causes of poverty, examining the perceiver's accompanying feelings and desires to help is challenging, as different feelings and actions can result from the same causal category (Weiner et al., 2010). For example, having a disability and spending money on things you do not need are both categorized as individualistic causes of poverty, but are likely to provoke very different feelings and motivations to help. Whereas poverty caused by a disability may lead to feelings of sympathy and a desire to help, poverty caused by spending habits may lead to feelings of anger and a lack of desire to provide assistance.

Weiner and colleagues (2010) recently proposed a more comprehensive classification system that recognizes and attempts to resolve these types of limitations. This taxonomy allows a perceived cause of poverty to be simultaneously categorized on three dimensions: locus, which differentiates whether the cause is internal or external to the individual; stability, which differentiates whether the cause is enduring or temporary; and controllability, which differentiates whether or not the cause is within someone's control (see Figure 1). This classification structure provides the opportunity for a closer examination of various perceived causes of poverty and the possibly different feelings and intended actions that accompany each cause. Causes that are perceived to be within a person's control, internal, and stable (e.g., lack of effort, lack of thrift), and thus possibly considered one's own responsibility, may elicit feelings of anger or frustration by the perceiver and the lack of a desire to offer assistance to a person in poverty. On the other hand, causes that are perceived to be out of one's control, external, and unstable (e.g., house burned down), and possibly considered not one's personal responsibility, may elicit feelings of sadness and a desire to help. This comprehensive

classification system can help researchers better understand how American's beliefs about causes of poverty influence their beliefs about providing assistance to those in need.

Although Weiner and colleagues' (2010) taxonomy has not yet been used to examine children's beliefs about the causes of poverty, it may be helpful in understanding the relationship between causal attributions, feelings, and desires to help over a period of time when ideas and beliefs about poverty are developing. The current study contributes to the causal attribution literature by studying kindergarten, first, and second graders attributions for poverty through this causal attributional lens.

Children's Perceptions of Causes of Poverty and Developmental Intergroup Theory

The current literature on young children's reasoning about poverty indicates that a shift in children's ideas about poverty occurs sometime during the elementary school years. Preschoolers can recognize the external differences between the rich and poor, but lack the ability to identify causes of poverty (Ramsey, 1991). However, by about the ages of 10 and 11, not only do children start ascribing negative traits to the poor, such as not being smart and having less friends than wealthy people, but the link between poverty and internal causes, such as lack of hard work, becomes more salient (Leahy, 1981; Sigelman, 2012; Skafte, 1989).

Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT) may help explain why this shift occurs in children's thinking about poverty. DIT postulates that children notice the social groups present in society and, when the differences and similarities between groups are not formally addressed, they come to their own conclusions (i.e., stereotypes and prejudices) as to why these groups exist (Bigler & Liben, 2007). These conclusions result from a three-step process: noticing certain differences between people, categorizing people into groups based on these salient attributes, and finally, ascribing affects and beliefs (which may or may not be accurate) to the groups. While some forms of diversity, such as gender and racial and ethnic diversity, may be more readily discussed with elementary school

children, teachers express reservations about how best to talk with students about issues related to economic diversity (White, Mistry, & Chow, 2013). This may lead to possible misconceptions about people who live in poverty.

While we know that children's ideas change throughout the elementary school years, what is not yet known is exactly how children's ideas about the causes of poverty evolve from year to year. Previous studies that have used a developmental approach to examine children's beliefs focused on children in age groups that were disbursed over a large span, with two to five years between each age group (Leahy, 1981; Leahy, 1983; Sigelman, 2012), leaving gaps in understanding the full developmental spectrum of children's evolving beliefs. The current study aimed to uncover some of the nuances that occur in children's thinking over a shorter period of time, from one school year to the next.

Socio-Cognitive Skill Development

The early elementary school years are an important age span to examine more closely, as children between the ages of 4 and 8 develop important socio-cognitive skills that have been shown to affect the way they think about others (Aboud, 1981; Bigler, 1995; Bigler & Liben, 1993; Doyle & Aboud, 1995). An important developmental milestone during this time frame is the ability to classify an object or person along more than one dimension (i.e., multiple classification). For example, a child with more well-developed multiple classification skills could possibly classify a girl living in poverty on multiple different dimensions (e.g., she's a child, she's a girl, and she lives in poverty), while a child who has not developed this skill might classify her on only one of those dimensions. In a study focused on children's gender stereotypes, children with less developed classification skills (as indicated by a sorting task) were more likely to make gender stereotypes than were children who had developed multiple classification skills (Bigler, 1995). This skill is important in thinking about how children view others, as it may allow an individual to look past certain differences and find a

common group that he or she and someone else may both belong to (e.g., their families have different amounts of money, but they both love to do art), and thus reduce the potential to form stereotypes.

Perspective-taking is another key socio-cognitive skill that develops during these early years (Aboud, 1981). This includes the development of reciprocity, or the understanding that self and others might prefer different things, and reconciliation, or the ability to recognize that both self and others can be right in their preferences. In a study that looked at children's racial prejudices, children who had more developed perspective-taking skills (e.g., those who indicated that their own opinion and that of another child were both valid) exhibited attitudes that did not support prejudices more than children who had less developed perspective-taking skills (e.g., those who indicated another child's opinion was not equally valid) (Doyle & Aboud, 1995). This skill is important to consider in understanding children's views of others, as it can enable an individual to recognize and accept a point of view, and possibly parts of a person's life (e.g., living in poverty), that may be different than their own.

Although these socio-cognitive skills have been measured in studies of children's understanding and biases based on gender, race, and ethnicity, they have not been considered in studies focused on children's reasoning about people belonging to different economic groups. This study will examine the association between socio-cognitive skills and children's beliefs about individuals living in poverty.

The Current Study

This study examined children's reasoning about children and families living in poverty through an attributional lens during the early elementary school years, a period that has been less well investigated in previous studies in this area. The following research questions guided this study:

Question 1: What types of causal attributions do children make about a family living in poverty?

Question 2: What is the relation between causal attribution types and children's affective

responses and desire to help?

Question 3: Does children's reasoning about causes of poverty vary by developmental status, as

measured in two ways – differences in socio-cognitive abilities and grade-level differences?

The hypothesis for the current study was that there would be differences in the endorsement

of the different types of causes based on children's socio-cognitive skills. Because of the ability to

understand another person's perspective and find commonalities between others and self, children

with more advanced socio-cognitive skills may be less likely than those with less developed socio-

cognitive skills to endorse causes that blame the individual (i.e., wasting money or lack of effort) and

more likely to endorse other causes (i.e., not getting paid well, bad luck). These feelings may change

as children get older and continue to be surrounded by stereotypes in the media, but the hypothesis

is that with the development of these socio-cognitive skills, there will initially be a period of not

placing blame on those living in poverty.

Methods

Data Source

Data for this study come from a larger curriculum intervention study aimed at improving

children's understanding about poverty. Two kindergarten and two first and second grade

combination classes (a total of four) were recruited for the larger project. At each grade level, one

class served as the intervention classroom and participated in a 5- to 7-week curriculum that

addressed poverty and economic inequality, while the other class served as the control classroom.

Students from all of the classrooms participated in a series of baseline assessments. For the current

study, data are taken from two of the baseline assessments: the socio-cognitive tasks (i.e., multiple

classification and cognitive perspective-taking measures) and an interview with children about their

views on poverty and economic inequality. Parents consented to this study through a process consistent with University and School Institutional Review Board consent procedures.

As reported in more detail below, the demographics of the current study participants can be classified as middle- to upper-middle-class. While it is important to understand the development of children's reasoning about poverty across various demographics, this population was of particular interest because of the implications for future support of social policies. Children who are born into the upper level of the income distribution are more likely than their low-income peers to remain at the top as adults (Isaacs, 2007) 77% of adults with a family income of over $150,000 reported that they voted in the November 2012 election (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), whereas only 46% of adults with a family income between $20,000 and $29,999 (Federal Poverty Level for a family of four is $23,500) reported voting in the same election. Understanding how children in the middle- to upper-income brackets reason about the causes of poverty and identifying what affects their feelings and willingness to assist those in need can shed light onto how these ideas develop over time and possibly influence future voting decisions.

Participants

There were a total of 89 students in the four participating classes. Two students were unable to complete the study's tasks and/or interviews and a third student did not receive parent permission to participate, bringing the total study sample to 86 participants. The participants were 37 kindergarten students and 49 students in combined first and second grade classes (24 first grade students and 25 second grade students) attending a laboratory elementary school affiliated with a university in a large city in southern California. Participants ranged in age from 5.41 years old to 8.99 years old ($M = 6.81$, $SD = .93$). 42 of the participants were males and 44 were females. The participants were 37% non-Latino White, 36% multi-racial/ethnic, 10% Asian American, 7% African American, 6% Latino/a American, and 4% other. Overall, the majority of the sample can be

characterized as upper-middle class. Specifically, only 8% of the participating students' families had an annual income of less than $50,000 and 11% had an annual between $50,000 and $99,999. In contrast, nearly half (48%) of all participating students' families reported an annual income between $100,000 and $349,999, and 33% reported an annual income of over $350,000.

Procedures

Participants were individually assessed and interviewed by a trained undergraduate, graduate student researcher, or the Principal Investigator during the school day or during their afterschool program time. Assessments and interviews took place in a small research office at the elementary school. The socio-cognitive tasks were each administered during a single sitting and the poverty and inequality interview and survey was administered during one to four sittings, depending on the age and attention span of the child.

Measures

Socio-cognitive tasks. Two indicators of the child's socio-cognitive abilities were assessed prior to the administration of the interview and survey. The first measure, a multiple classification task, assessed children's ability to sort and classify objects on more than one dimension (Bigler, 1995; Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007). Participants were given a set of 12 pictures consisting of blue hats, red hats, blue shoes, and red shoes and were asked to sort the pictures into categories on a board marked off into four quadrants, using as many or as few of the quadrants as needed. If the participant was unable to independently sort the pictures along both dimensions (object and color) simultaneously, the researcher sorted the pictures accordingly and asked the participant why the objects in one of the quadrants were grouped together. Possible answers included they were grouped by the object, the color, both the object and color, or a different incorrect response. The question was then repeated with a different group in a different quadrant. Based on this assessment, participants received a score ranging from 0 to 3; higher scores indicate more advanced multiple

classification skills. Participants received a score of 3 if he or she correctly sorted the pictures along both dimensions (object and color) and could justify why. A score of 2 indicated that the participant did not sort independently along both dimensions, but was able to provide an appropriate justification when prompted to do so. A score of 1 indicated that the participant was able to correctly sort the pictures along both dimensions but could not provide a correct justification for the sort. A score of 0 indicated the participant did not correctly sort the pictures and could not correctly identify both two dimensions.

The second socio-cognitive task was an adapted version of a perspective-taking task that assessed the participant's ability to understand another person's perspective (Aboud 1981; Doyle & Aboud, 1995). Participants were shown a numbered "liking board" and told to place objects they liked closer to them on the board and objects they did not like as much further away on the board. After a warm-up activity, participants were asked to place pictures of six different activities on the board, in order of preference. After establishing the rank order of the activities, the researcher laid out a second set of activity cards in the opposite order of the participant's and explained that another (fictitious) child chose that ranking. The participant was asked if he or she and the peer were both right or if someone was wrong and why. The activity and follow up questions were repeated, with a fictitious student's cards displayed in yet another order from the participant's. For each administration, participants received a score of 2 if he or she indicated that both rankings were correct and acceptable and could provide an appropriate justification. A score of 1 indicated the participant indicated that both perspectives were permissible but could not provide an appropriate justification. Participants received a score of 0 if they indicated that someone was wrong or incorrect in their rankings. The scores from both administrations were summed to create a final score that ranged in value from 0 to 4. Scores of 3 or 4 indicated that the student was able to recognize and accept self and another's judgments as equally valid.

Poverty and economic inequality interview and survey (pretest assessment). The interview and survey assessed children's beliefs and attitudes about poverty, economic inequality, and providing assistance to people living in poverty. Questions and survey items were adapted from previous studies on similar topics, conducted with both children and adults (Bullock, 1999; Crosby, 2000; Mistry, 2000; Mistry, et al., 2012; Sigelman, 2012; Weiner, et al., 2010). The interview was comprised of four sections (beliefs about wealth and poverty; beliefs about the distribution of rich, middle class, and poor individuals in society; beliefs and attributions about poverty in response to a vignette about a particular child and family; and beliefs about responsibilities to help poor families and children). The current study uses data from the third section of the interview, in which participants were presented with the following vignette and accompanying pictures about a child (Jason or Jessica - gender-matched) whose family is poor.

> I'm going to tell you about a little girl named Jessica. Jessica's family is poor and has very little money. Here is a picture of the house she lives in with her family (POINT TO PICTURE OF HOUSE) – it is small and old. Because Jessica's family doesn't have a lot of money, she can't buy a lot of things she wants or needs. Here is a picture of her backpack and shoes (POINT TO PICTURE OF BACKPACK AND SHOES). The backpack and shoes used to belong to Jessica's older sister but now they are too small for her so Jessica uses them. They are old and worn out but her parents don't have enough money to buy her new shoes or a new backpack. Jessica doesn't get to take a lot of trips or visit new places, but enjoys playing games like tag and hide-and-seek with her brother and sister. Sometimes Jessica's family doesn't have enough money for all of the food they want, so she doesn't get to buy many treats or snacks.

Participants were asked if they thought it was the target child's (TC) family's fault that they were poor. They were then asked about possible causes for the family's poverty. Using a 5-point scale (1 = "No, no way" to 5 = "Yes, for sure"), participants were presented with eight possible causes of poverty and were asked to indicate whether or not the given cause was the reason why the target child's family was poor. Racially and ethnically ambiguous hand-drawn pictures designed to help concretize the causal reason (e.g., poor due to bad luck) accompanied each question. The eight questions were developed in consultation with Bernie Weiner, Ph.D. and represented all three

dimensions of interest (i.e., locus, stability, and controllability) (R.S. Mistry, personal communication, 2014). Figure 2 shows each question for this section and its placement on the causal attribution taxonomy matrix.

The following questions were also developed in consultation with Dr. Weiner. Participants were presented with two possible reasons for why the family was poor, which intentionally represented two very different causes in the taxonomy: an external, uncontrollable, and stable cause (i.e., "Imagine that TC's family is poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools") and an internal, controllable, stable cause (i.e., "Imagine that TC's family is poor because TC's parents spend money on things they don't need and they don't save their money"). Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale (1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "A lot") how sad, mad, and sorry they felt for the family and indicate on a different 5-point scale (1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Very") how much they would want to help the family.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Most questions on the poverty interview and survey required students to use a 5-point response scale. However, preliminary analyses supported the collapse of the 5-point scale into a 3-point scale, as it was a better representation of participants' choices. Students mostly utilized the points that corresponded to the bottom (1 = "No, no way"), middle (3 = "Sort of" or "Maybe", depending on the question), and top (5 = "Yes, for sure") of the scale. In collapsing the scale, the second point on the scale was combined with the first ("No, no way") and the fourth point was combined with the fifth ("Yes, for sure").

Preliminary analyses also revealed modest associations among participants' responses and classroom assignment (intervention/control), gender, race and ethnicity, or family income. Across the set of items, differences by students' racial/ethnic background were observed for 1 item (i.e., "Is

TC's family poor because TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs?"), by gender for 1 item (i.e., "Is TC's family poor because TC's parents are not very smart?"), and for 2 items for the treatment condition (i.e., Is TC's family poor because TC's parents' bosses at work don't treat them fairly?" and "Is TC's family poor because TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs?"). Because of the lack of consistent and systematic differences, classroom assignment, gender, race and ethnicity, and family income were not included as covariates in further analyses.

Young Children's Reasoning about Poverty

Blame. When asked if it was the TC's family's fault that they were poor, the majority of students did not think the family was to blame for their current state of poverty. 83% of students said it was not their fault, 6% said maybe it was their fault, and 11% said it was their fault.

Causes of poverty. When presented with the set of eight different reasons for why the TC's family might be poor, on average, participants indicated that all of the possible causes were "maybe" reasons that the TC's family was poor (see Table 1). Overall, the cause that had the highest endorsement as a possible reason for the family living in poverty was that the TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs (an external, controllable by others, and stable cause), while the cause with the lowest endorsement was the TC's parents are not very smart (an internal, uncontrollable, and stable cause), which further suggests that children do not blame individuals for their current state of living in poverty.

To further explore Weiner and colleagues' (2010) causal attribution taxonomy, further analyses were conducted to see whether participants were more likely to endorse a certain category in each dimension (e.g., internal locus versus external locus). Although there are two categories within each dimension (i.e., internal versus external within the locus dimension; stable versus unstable within the stability dimension; controllable versus uncontrollable within the controllability dimension), Dr. Weiner suggested that the controllable category be separated into a controllable

internal group (i.e., "TC's parents don't always want to work", "TC's parents spend money on things they don't need") and a controllable external group ("TC's parents' bosses at work don't treat them fairly", "TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs") because causes can be controlled by both the individual (internal) and by outsiders (external) leading to different feelings and desires to help. To be consistent for analysis purposes, the uncontrollable causes dimension was also divided into internal and external groups. Descriptives for the whole sample are shown in Table 2. Paired-samples t-tests were used to see whether participants were more likely to endorse internal locus versus external locus causes, stable versus unstable causes, controllable internal versus controllable external causes, or uncontrollable internal versus uncontrollable external causes. Participants gave significantly higher ratings to: external locus of control causes ($M = 0.97$, $SD = 0.39$) than to internal locus of control causes ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.53$), t (85) = -5.25, $p = .000$, controllable external causes ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.56$) than to controllable internal causes ($M = 0.81$, $SD = 0.66$), t (85) = -5.613, $p = .000$, and uncontrollable external causes ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.50$) than to uncontrollable internal causes ($M = 0.59$, $SD = 0.61$), t (84) = -2.08, $p = .040$. Ratings of stable and unstable causes did not differ significantly from each other. These results indicate that on average, participants endorsed external causes as possible reasons for the family living in poverty more so than internal causes.

Accompanying feelings and desire to help. Correlations among feelings and desire to help variables can be found in Table 3. As shown in Table 4, in response to both possible reasons the TC's family might be poor (i.e., "TC's parents didn't go to good schools because there were no good schools in their neighborhood", "TC's parents spend money on things they don't need"), students generally reported feeling between a little and very sad and sorry for the TC's family and not at all mad to a little mad at his family. Most participants indicated that they would want to help the family. Paired-samples *t*-tests failed to reveal any statistically significant differences in levels of

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feeling sad, mad, sorry, or wanting to help between the two different causes of poverty.

Developmental Differences in Reasoning about Poverty

Socio-cognitive differences. As expected, participants' performance on socio-cognitive tasks were positively correlated with both age and grade. For these analyses, participants' were first divided into the following three groups based on their multiple classification scores: able to both sort and classify ($n = 15$), able to either sort or classify but not both ($n = 38$), and unable to sort and unable to classify ($n = 29$). Analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were used to analyze group differences for the causal attribution and feelings and desires to help questions. To account for multiple comparisons, an adjusted p-value was used (i.e., standard p-value of .05 ÷ 8 comparisons = adjusted p-value of .006). As shown in Tables 1 and 2, there were no statistically significant differences found for causal attribution questions, either for the individual causes or the separation by dimensions. Additionally, there were no significant differences on the feelings and desire to help questions based on multiple classification abilities (see Table 4).

Participants were then divided into two groups based on their perspective-taking scores: able to recognize and justify self and another's judgments as equally valid ($n = 40$) and unable to recognize and/or justify self and another's judgments as equally valid ($n = 45$). Independent-samples t-tests were used to analyze group differences for the causal attribution and feelings and desire to help questions. There were no statistically significant differences found for causal attribution questions, either for the individual causes or the separation by dimensions (see Tables 1 and 2). As shown in Table 4, there were no statistically significant differences found in the feelings and desire to help responses.

Grade-level differences. Grade-level differences were then examined. For these analyses, students were divided into two groups: kindergarteners ($n = 36$) and a combined group of first and second graders ($n = 48$), which will be referred to as the "primary" grade students. Because all of the

first and second participants were in combination classes, the decision was made to group them together for analyses, as their classroom educational experiences were similar at the time of administration. An adjusted p-value was again used to account for multiple comparisons (i.e., standard p-value of .05 ÷ 8 comparisons = adjusted p-value of .006).

To examine possible group differences in the causal attribution responses, independent-samples t-tests were conducted. Using the three-point scale (0 = "No, no way", 1 = "Maybe", and 2 = "Yes, for sure"), kindergartners were more likely than primary students to say that maybe the TC's family was poor because his parents don't always want to work (see Table 1). When separated into causal attribution dimensions, kindergarten students' ratings of unstable causes, internal causes, and internal controllable causes were significantly higher than primary students' ratings. Results from these independent-samples t-tests can be found in Table 2. Finally, on the feelings and expressing a desire to help responses, no significant grade level differences were found (see Table 4).

Discussion

In a time when millions of children and families live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), it is crucial to understand the development of beliefs that may affect individuals' willingness to offer assistance to those in need. This study looked at an age span that has received less attention in developmental literature about evolving poverty beliefs and aimed to uncover some of the nuances in young children's reasoning about children and families who live in poverty. It contributes to the current literature in that it is one of the first studies to explore the attitudes of children within a close age range (kindergarten, first, and second graders) and to use a more detailed causal attribution classification taxonomy to identify trends in children's thinking about poverty. Overall, children did not blame the hypothetical family depicted in the vignette for being poor, endorsed external causes of poverty more so than internal causes, and expressed wanting to help families living in poverty, regardless of why they were said to be poor. Although there were not meaningful differences based

on socio-cognitive abilities, some differences were found between the kindergarteners' and primary students' thinking, which indicates that even within this close age range, children's ideas may be evolving as they become more aware of social class as a social group category.

Blame and Causal Attributions

Over 80% of children said that it was not the family's fault that they were poor, a staggering contrast to the 46% of adults who believe that poverty is outside of an individual's control (Wessler, 2014). This suggests that children may start off not blaming individuals living in poverty and that, between childhood and adulthood, a large percentage of the population experiences a major shift in their beliefs about poverty. Additionally, none of the possible causes presented to students were seen as definitive reasons for why the hypothetical family was poor, indicating that children in this age group do not yet have strong opinions about the causes of poverty. This seems appropriate, as previous studies have shown that preschoolers have difficulty making causal attributions (Ramsey, 1991), so children at this age may just be starting to form their ideas about possible causes of poverty.

Although only one significant difference was found by grade level on the individual causal attribution questions, multiple differences appeared when individual causes of poverty were aggregated into their causal attribution dimensions. Kindergarten students' ratings of unstable causes, internal causes, and internal controllable causes were significantly higher than primary students' ratings and their ratings of internal uncontrollable causes were marginally significant ($p=.007$). Kindergarteners indicated the causes within these dimensions were maybe reasons why Jason's family was poor, whereas primary students' responses were somewhere between no and maybe, indicating a shift in causal attributions between these two grades. Using the taxonomy (Weiner et al., 2010) to group these causes into their dimensions allowed a theme to emerge across

responses, suggesting that kindergarteners are more likely to endorse internal causes as possible reasons for poverty than primary students.

Although the study's hypothesis suggested that the development of socio-cognitive skills might be the driving force for differences such as these in children's thinking about poverty, these differences did not correlate with development of multiple classification or perspective-taking skills. One possible reason is that while these two skills are important to consider, certain schooling experiences during the early elementary years may also influence children's thinking about others. Most schools impose a cutoff date for school entry (e.g., September 1), where students whose birthdays come before the date can start kindergarten that year and students whose birthdays come after the date have to wait to start until the next year. Previous studies have used the cut-off entry date to measure differences in children's cognitive skills in kindergarten and first grade (Christian, Morrison, Frazier, & Massetti, 2000; Morrison, Smith, & Dow-Ehrensberger, 1995) and found that first graders had certain skills that were more developed than their similarly aged kindergarten peers (e.g., mathematics and letter recognition skills; memory skills). Experiences in the first grade classrooms had helped students develop certain skills that the kindergarten students had not yet developed. In the current study, although significant changes were not found based on multiple classification and perspective-taking skills, other experiences in the classroom may have influenced the way primary students thought about and responded to these causal attribution questions.

Feelings and Helping Behaviors

Overall, differences in causal attributions did not seem to affect children's feelings or desires to help the TC's family. Although adults' feelings and helping behaviors are often dependent on the perceived cause of poverty (Zucker & Weiner, 1993), young children appear to want to help others, no matter the cause. One possible explanation is that children are often taught to be kind to others and think about how others feel, which may transfer to their feelings and desires to help others

outside of their classroom environment. Many schools, including the one in this study, utilize social-emotional learning programs, which can include developing emotion recognition and empathy (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). These types of programs may influence children's ability to empathize with others and their desire to help others in need. Additionally, there may be some effects of social desirability in this age group. As children learn more about what is socially expected and accepted, they may adjust their interactions and responses to what they think others want to hear. Social desirability has been shown to become stronger throughout preschool (Ford, 1970) and the early school years and decrease as children get older (Crandall, Crandall, & Katkovsky, 1965). The children in our study fall right into the timespan when social desirability is at its peak and may have provided what they thought were the "right" answers in response to how much they wanted to help the TC's family.

Causal Attribution Taxonomy

A unique contribution of this study was the utilization of a causal attribution taxonomy (Weiner et al., 2010) that had not previously been applied to children's thinking about poverty. While this taxonomy might help explain the connection between adults' causal attributions, accompanying feelings, and desires to provide help, upon initial review of the results, it may appear that this taxonomy does not reveal similar nuances in children's thinking about poverty. Overall, children in this age range did not strongly endorse any of the causes, had similar feelings toward the family whether their poverty was caused by an internal and controllable cause (spending money on things they don't need) or an external and uncontrollable cause (there were no good schools in the neighborhood), and wanted to help the family no matter what the cause.

However, this study is the beginning of a potentially interesting causal attribution story. It is one part of the larger developmental spectrum in terms of children's development of causal attributions, accompanying feelings, and desires to help. Although not as developed or extreme as

adults' endorsements, feelings, and behaviors, the results show that children's ideas and beliefs are developing in these early years and some differences can be seen even between two consecutive grade levels. If this study were to include third, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, you may start to see that some of the causes become more strongly endorsed, feelings about the family begin to change, and the desire to help becomes conditional, findings that might not be captured using the former individualistic, structural/societal, and fatalistic categorization system. As social desirability declines over the elementary school years (Crandall et al., 1965) and as children become more aware of the stereotypes in the media (Clawson & Trice, 2000) and in society, we may start to see the development of the same patterns (i.e., the links between causal attributions and the accompanying feelings and desires to help) that we see in the adult literature.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study adds to the current literature about children's reasoning about poverty, there are some limitations to this work. First, the sample size was small and all participants were from one school site. While understanding how the student population in the current study (i.e., middle- to upper-middle-class) thinks about poverty is important, the results of this study only represent one specific group of children and do not give, or even attempt to give, a complete picture of children's understanding of people living in poverty. Future studies should be conducted in various school settings that represent diverse student populations. Additionally, this study focused only on lower elementary school grade students' beliefs and therefore future studies should include a larger sample of children spanning a larger developmental timespan.

In addition to continuing the research on children's beliefs about poverty, it is important to understand the social contexts in which this development is occurring. Studying the family practices that may influence children's reasoning about people living in poverty may give a valuable perspective to this developmental story. Future research should also invest efforts in the creation,

implementation, and assessment of developmentally appropriate lessons focused on teaching children about this type of diversity. Instead of leaving children to form their own conclusions about who lives in poverty and why, they should be informed about the various causes of poverty and the different types of people who may be poor. The early elementary grades can be an ideal time to begin these types of conversations, given that the current study results show that ideas are developing and shifting during this time. If children can get the appropriate and correct information about poverty before stereotypes and misconceptions are formed, we may see a change in the understanding of and support for people living in poverty.

Conclusion

Children and families living in poverty make up a part of the diverse population in the United States, yet often do not receive adequate social and financial support. Some of this lack of support may arise out of individuals being misinformed about the causes of poverty, resulting in the formation and endorsement of stereotypes about the people in this group. Understanding children's thinking about this topic can help researchers, teachers, and parents better understand the development of beliefs and inform the ways to engage them in developmentally appropriate discussions about what poverty is, who lives in poverty, and the various causes of poverty to ensure that they receive accurate information about this social group. This work is important, as the children we are currently raising will become the adults responsible for creating and passing social policies that address and support the vast population of Americans, including millions of American children, living in poverty.

Figure 1

Examples of Causes of Poverty Using Updated Attribution Taxonomy (R.S. Mistry, personal communication with Dr. Weiner, 2014; Weiner et al., 2010)

CONTROLLABILITY	STABILITY	LOCUS	
		Internal	External
Controllable	Stable	Laziness or lack of thrift	Discrimination or prejudice
	Unstable	Temporary lack of effort	Low wages
Uncontrollable	Stable	Lack of aptitude	Lack of good schools
	Unstable	Temporary Illness	Bad luck

Figure 2

Examples of Causes of Poverty Interview Questions (R.S. Mistry, personal communication with Dr. Weiner, 2014; Weiner et al., 2010)

CONTROLLABILITY	STABILITY	LOCUS	
		Internal	External
Controllable	Stable	Are they poor because TC's parents spend money on things they don't need?	Are they poor because TC's parents' bosses at work don't treat them fairly?
	Unstable	Is TC's family poor because TC's parents don't always want to work?	Are they poor because TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs?
Uncontrollable	Stable	Are they poor because TC's parents are not very smart?	Are they poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools because there were no good schools in their neighborhood?
	Unstable	Are they poor because TC's parents got sick and lost their jobs but now are healthy?	Is TC's family poor because they've had bad luck?

Table 1

Endorsements of Causes of Poverty

Causal Attribution	Whole Sample (N= 86) M (SD)	Multiple Classification Ability				Cognitive Perspective-taking Ability			Grade		
		Unable (n = 30) M (SD)	Partially Able (n = 38) M (SD)	Fully Able (n =15) M (SD)	ANOVA	Unable (n = 45) M (SD)	Able (n = 40) M (SD)	t-test	Kindergarten (n = 37) M (SD)	Primary (n = 49) M (SD)	t-test
Is TC's family poor because…											
they have had bad luck?	.79 (.69)	.83 (.83)	.84 (.64)	.53 (.52)	$F (2, 80) = 1.18$	.80 (.78)	.77 (.58)	$t (82) = 0.21$	.84 (.80)	.75 (.60)	$t (83) = 0.58$
TC's parents don't always want to work?	.67 (.76)	.83 (.79)	.62 (.75)	.47 (.64)	$F (2, 81) = 1.38$	.76 (.83)	.60 (.67)	$t (83) = 0.94$	.97 (.80)	.45 (.65)	$t (84) =3.36**$
TC's parents' bosses at work don't treat them fairly?	1.14 (.75)	1.20 (.81)	1.05 (.72)	1.13 (.74)	$F (2, 81) = 0.33$	1.04 (.83)	1.25 (.67)	$t (83) = -1.25$	1.11 (.84)	1.16 (.69)	$t (84) = -0.33$
TC's parents don't get paid a lot of money from their jobs?	1.27 (.74)	1.13 (.86)	1.41 (.68)	1.13 (.64)	$F (2, 81) = 1.45$	1.23 (.86)	1.28 (.60)	$t (83) = -0.05$	1.35 (.79)	1.20 (.71)	$t (84) = 0.91$
there were no good schools in parents' neighborhood when they were growing up?	.67 (.60)	.73 (.64)	.67 (.58)	.47 (.52)	$F (2, 81) = 1.03$	.67 (.67)	.70 (.52)	$t (83) = -0.26$	.73 (.69)	.63 (.53)	$t (84) = 0.74$
TC's parents spend money on things they don't need?	.95 (.88)	1.13 (.94)	.80 (.86)	.93 (.80)	$F (2, 81) = 1.25$	.96 (.90)	.98 (.86)	$t (83) = -0.10$	1.14 (.92)	.82 (.83)	$t (84) = 1.68$
TC's parents are not very smart?	.53 (.75)	.67 (.84)	.49 (.68)	.47 (.74)	$F (2, 81) = 0.58$	.49 (.82)	.57 (.68)	$t (83) = -0.53$	.76 (.90)	.37 (.57)	$t (84) = 2.32$
TC's parents got sick and lost their jobs but now are healthy?	.63 (.74)	.80 (.81)	.54 (.68)	.47 (.64)	$F (2, 81) = 1.52$	.80 (.82)	.43 (.59)	$t (83)= 2.44$	.84 (.84)	.47 (.62)	$t (84) = 2.23$

Note. M = mean. SD = standard deviation. The range of responses was: 0 ("No, no way"), 1 ("Maybe"), and 2 ("Yes, for sure"). *p < .006. **p ≤ .001.

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Table 2

Endorsements of Causes of Poverty by Taxonomy Dimensions

Causal Attribution Dimensions	Whole Sample (N = 86) M (SD)	Multiple Classification Ability				Cognitive Perspective-taking Ability			Grade		
		Unable (n = 30) M (SD)	Partially Able (n = 39) M (SD)	Fully Able (n =15) M (SD)	ANOVA	Unable (n = 45) M (SD)	Able (n = 40) M (SD)	t-test	Kindergarten (n = 37) M (SD)	Primary (n = 49) M (SD)	t-test
Stable	.83 (.47)	.93 (.46)	.75 (.50)	.75 (.34)	$F (2, 81) = 1.51$	.79 (.50)	.88 (.43)	$t (83) = -0.85$	.93 (.49)	.75 (.44)	$t (83) = 1.87$
Unstable	.84 (.45)	.90 (.50)	.85 (.42)	.65 (.30)	$F (2, 81) = 1.73$	.91 (.50)	.77 (.38)	$t (83) = 1.41$	1.00 (.46)	.72 (.40)	$t (84) = 3.03*$
Locus of Control Internal	.70 (.53)	.86 (.51)	.61 (.58)	.58 (.34)	$F (2, 81) = 2.35$	.75 (.60)	.64 (.45)	$t (83) = 0.91$	.93 (.56)	.53 (.44)	$t (84)= 3.70**$
Locus of Control External	.97 (.39)	.98 (.45)	1.00 (.38)	.82 (.24)	$F (2, 81) = 1.24$	.94 (.43)	1.00 (.36)	$t (83) = -0.69$	1.01 (.42)	.94 (.38)	$t (84) = 0.75$
Controllable Internal	.81 (.66)	.98 (.71)	.71 (.67)	.70 (.46)	$F (2, 81) = 1.77$	.86 (.74)	.79 (.58)	$t (83) = 0.47$	1.05 (.69)	.63 (.59)	$t (84) = 3.05*$
Controllable External	1.20 (.56)	1.17 (.61)	1.23 (.54)	1.13 (.55)	$F (2, 81) = 0.20$	1.16 (.64)	1.26 (.47)	$t (83) = -0.87$	1.23 (.60)	1.18 (.54)	$t (84) = 0.38$
Uncontrollable Internal	.59 (.61)	.73 (.64)	.51 (.62)	.47 (.52)	$F (2, 81) = 1.43$	.64 (.71)	.50 (.48)	$t (83) = 1.08$	.80 (.73)	.42 (.25)	$t (84) = 2.78$
Uncontrollable External	.73 (.50)	.78 (.57)	.75 (.43)	.50 (.46)	$F (2, 81) = 1.83$	.73 (.53)	.73 (.47)	$t (83)= 0.02$	.78 (.56)	.69 (.45)	$t (84) = 0.88$

Note. M = mean. SD = standard deviation. The range of responses was: 0 ("No, no way"), 1 ("Maybe"), and 2 ("Yes, for sure"). *p < .006. **p ≤ .001.

Table 3

Correlations Between Feelings and Helping Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. How sad would you feel for TC if TC's family was poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools?	--							
2. How mad would you be at TC if TC's family was poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools?	-.116	--						
3. How sorry would you feel for TC if TC's family was poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools?	.335**	-.056	--					
4. How much would you want to help TC if TC's family was poor because TC's parents didn't go to good schools?	.504**	-.033	.494**	--				
5. How sad would you feel for TC if TC's family was poor because his parents spend their money on things they don't need?	.429**	-.130	.265*	.484**	--			
6. How mad would you be at TC if TC's family was poor because his parents spend their money on things they don't need?	-.015	.592**	-.010	.011	-.097	--		
7. How sorry would you feel for TC if TC's family was poor because his parents spend their money on things they don't need?	.273*	-.187	.302**	.402**	.484**	-.208	--	
8. How much would you want to help TC if TC's family was poor because his parents spend their money on things they don't need?	.407**	-.125	.453**	.632**	.514**	-.058	.382**	--

Note. *p < .05. **p ≤ .01.

Table 4

Feelings and Desire to Help Based on Different Causes of Poverty

Reason for Poverty and Accompanying Feelings	Whole Sample (N = 84) M (SD)	Multiple Classification Ability				Cognitive Perspective-taking Ability			Grade		
		Unable (n = 29) M (SD)	Partially Able (n = 38) M (SD)	Fully Able (n =15) M (SD)	ANOVA	Unable (n = 43) M (SD)	Able (n = 40) M (SD)	t-test	Kindergarten (n = 35) M (SD)	Primary (n = 49) M (SD)	t-test
TC's parents didn't go to good schools											
How sad would you feel for TC?	1.46 (.70)	1.45 (.74)	1.50 (.65)	1.33 (.82)	F (2, 79) = 0.30	1.39 (.76)	1.53 (.64)	t (81) = -0.84	1.43 (.78)	1.49 (.65)	t (82) = -0.39
How mad would you be at TC?	.68 (.81)	.86 (.83)	.45 (.69)	.93 (.96)	F (2, 79)=3.16	.70 (.83)	.68 (.80)	t (81) = 0.13	.66 (.80)	.69 (.82)	t (82) = -0.20
How sorry would you feel for TC?	1.45 (.74)	1.14 (.79)	1.55 (.65)	1.73 (.70)	F (2, 79)=4.39	1.33 (.78)	1.56 (.68)	t (81) = -1.55	1.26 (.82)	1.59 (.64)	t (82) = -2.02
How much would you want to help TC?	1.54 (.69)	1.41 (.78)	1.61 (.60)	1.53 (.74)	F (2, 79) = 0.63	1.56 (.67)	1.50 (.72)	t (81) = 0.70	1.51 (.74)	1.55 (.65)	t (82) = -0.24
TC's parents spend money on things they don't need											
How sad would you feel for TC?	1.53 (.72)	1.36 (.78)	1.76 (.49)	1.27 (.96)	F (2, 78)=4.02	1.42 (.77)	1.63 (.67)	t (80) = -1.23	1.53 (.75)	1.53 (.71)	t (81) = -0.01
How mad would you be at TC?	.81 (.79)	1.00 (.86)	.61 (.72)	.93 (.70)	F (2, 78) = 2.40	.83 (.80)	.78 (.80)	t (80) = 0.33	.82 (.80)	.80 (.79)	t (81) = 0.16
How sorry would you feel for TC?	1.57 (.67)	1.42 (.74)	1.71 (.57)	1.40 (.74)	F (2, 78) = 1.97	1.50 (.71)	1.65 (.62)	t (80) = -1.02	1.50 (.71)	1.61 (.64)	t (81) = -0.75
How much would you want to help TC?	1.45 (.77)	1.21 (.92)	1.65 (.53)	1.27 (.88)	F (2, 78)=0.44	1.29 (.84)	1.60 (.67)	t (80) = -1.87	1.38 (.82)	1.49 (.74)	t (81) = -0.62

Note. M = mean. *SD* = standard deviation. The range of responses was: 0 ("Not at all"), 1 ("A little"), and 2 ("Very" for feelings questions, "A lot" for helping questions).

*p < .006. **p ≤ .001

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