

# Dissing the Rich for Fun, Profit, and Public Policy



Send him mail.



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I enjoy going online and engaging anti-Win-Win Worlders in discussions on Objectivism and libertarianism. I strongly suggest it for Voluntaryists, libertarians and Objectivists who have strong stomachs for *ad hominem* and false premises. Of course, I don’t hope for one minute that my little outreach will end up changing the minds of my adversaries. But it keeps my mind sharp. And by engaging in this public activity, perhaps some onlooker will be given cause to at least ponder what a Win-Win World might be like.

Recently in one of these sessions I encountered an individual who described herself as working for an agency that sets homeless people up with a place to stay. She asked me to take a look at an opinion article written by Daniel Goleman and provide her with my reaction.

## **Survey Said: Rich Folk Don’t Care**

The essay was entitled, “Rich People Just Care Less” and was posted on *The New York Times* (surprised?) web site. The editorial began: “Turning a blind eye. Giving someone the cold shoulder. Looking down on people. Seeing right through them.”

I knew right there that I was in for a real treat.

So I read on. It turns out that “a growing body of recent research shows that people with the most social power pay scant attention to those with little power.” Researchers arranged get-acquainted sessions between high- and low-power folks and found that the “higher-status people” showed fewer signals of paying attention, and were more likely to “express

disregard” and “take over the conversation and interrupt or look past the other speaker.”

The piece went on to report that this type of activity occurs even when we of lesser power have contact with those of lesser power than ourselves. So it isn't just the upper 1% of us who are supposedly committing these interpersonal transgressions... it's everyone but the absolute lowest guy on the totem pole. I guess he has to resort to kicking the dog... if he hasn't already eaten it.

What's more, a portion of this “growing body of recent research” indicates that “the more-powerful were less compassionate toward the hardships described by the less powerful.” It went on to say, “in general, we focus the most on those we value the most.” Poor folk are “better in tune with interpersonal relationships because they have to be.”

### **And the Moral of the Story is...**

Goleman, and the researchers, then make the predictable leap: that the findings “suggest implications” in the forming of public policy. No proof as to the veracity of this claim is offered, of course. The connection is not scientifically made. Regardless, the writer goes on to infer this to be the reason for “the insistence by some House Republicans.... on impeding the implementation of Obamacare”. Heavens! You mean the House Democrats, who pushed it, have *less* social power than the Republicans? If it's all simply a matter of income, what makes the Dems so damn compassionate?

One more fun surprise. The article admits a good portion of this research was done jointly by researchers at the University of Amsterdam and the University of California at Berkeley.

So you see where I'm going with this. This essay, and the research that spawned it, are textbook examples of liberal prejudice. First of all, “researchers” have no business suggesting and implying anything. All they are qualified to do, and all they ought to do is present the results of their research and let the rest of us draw whatever implications we can from their work. If it's good solid research, it will speak for itself. Don't overstep the boundaries of your research by speculating. That's not the job of a scientist. Of course, no one among us would argue that they *are* scientists in the first place, I'm sure. But I'm just as sure they consider themselves to be.

One of the things that convinces me something is awry is the fact that the researchers and opinion writer use the terms “wealth” and “social power” interchangeably. Excuse me, but where is it proven that richer people necessarily have higher social power and poorer ones necessarily have less? What exactly *is* social power, anyway? When did this concept get invented, and who invented it? The article fails to address these issues assuming, I suppose, that these “truths” are *a priori*. But it seems to me that equating a financial or economic concept (“rich”) to a social concept (“social power”) simply begs some explanation.

No one can accuse liberals of the sin of being overly precise.

Another thing. Taking a step back, is it just me, or do liberals seem to have an unhealthy preoccupation with power? They appear to view social issues in terms of a battle between who they perceive to be the oppressed and the oppressors, between themselves and those who do not share their views, or those who try to hold their feet to the fire of rationalism. Liberals always seem to look for the differences, not the similarities. This is not the outlook of someone who wishes to work in good faith with all interested parties to find solutions that improve conditions. It's not the outlook of someone who wishes to form alliances and engage in voluntary trade. It's the outlook of a bully spoiling for a fight. This is win-lose philosophy in action. I am happy to grant their wish.

### **What's the Why?**

So, since apparently Goleman and the researchers are attaching a positive value to the ability to empathize, in the interest of fairness let's turn the tables. Let's now empathize with the rich as well as the poor. As much as I suspect the aforementioned researchers and article author would disapprove, I have done some independent thinking on this. Here are a few thoughts about the results of the study from the standpoint of the "socially powerful".

Richer folk don't pay as much attention to poorer folk as poorer pay to richer. Have I overlooked something, or does this not seem obvious and even, dare I say, a bit natural? After all, common sense tells us that we *all* have this "what's in it for me?" outlook. Why on earth would I be interested in dealing (trading) with someone who has little or nothing to offer? Why would I *not* be more interested in dealing with someone who has equal or greater resources than I? This explains both the conclusion and its corollary: poorer people relate better because the potential for reward is so much greater.

Another reason for the apparent disparity in ability to concentrate upon the woes of others – admittedly a more cynical one – might be that many poor people have little to do all day long, other than involve themselves in personal relationships. Most wealthier people have precious little time for social pleasantries... they're too busy struggling to acquire and protect their resources. Sure, I know that Hispanic "immigrants" clean our toilets. That's tough work. Some hold down two or more jobs and have large families at home. I'll bet those guys don't have time to say "boo", either.

Here's one of my favorite explanations for the results of the research. The free market (including ones that are only kind of free, like ours) tends to favor the successful over the less successful. It's social Darwinism (in its original, non-pejorative sense); societies that value success over failure are likelier to survive and thrive than those celebrating widespread failure. I suspect we are all hard-wired to revere and emulate the more successful, and avoid the less successful. Who wants to take the chance that failure will rub

off on them?

As a matter of fact, I think for the purposes of the opinion piece, instead of rich v. poor, more social power v. less social power, the writer should have used the terms “more successful” and “less successful”. And then, of course, they should have defined what they meant by “successful.” This would have removed much of the taint of liberal bias that I am detecting.

Here’s another possible reason for the attention disparity. The successful are continually hit up with pleas and coercive demands to share the proceeds of their success—while receiving little or nothing in return. I think those of us who are less successful have utterly no idea of the kind of pressure this places on the more successful. They may attempt to deal with this pressure by keeping the rest of us at physical and emotional arm’s length. Who can blame them? As the research shows, I’d do the exact same thing myself in their shoes.

Any or all of these ideas could be the reasons behind the findings, such as they are. The author gives us very little information on the sources of this research, its methodology and any possible researcher bias. We are virtually powerless to check it first hand to independently judge the veracity of the findings. Any writing that presents research findings and suggests implications, but doesn’t give you a way to verify, is strongly suspect.

Regardless of all this, when it comes to performing and reporting this type of research, to paraphrase the Borg, persistence is futile. Research into the relationship between the rich and the poor as it relates to the formation of public policy becomes irrelevant in a **Win-Win World**. Of course, some folks will always gather greater resources than others in such a society. But without a state to act as nanny and redistribute wealth, the “suggesting” about implications on public policy is moot. There will *be* no public policy. Financial differences between individuals will be an accepted condition. Those wishing to increase their resources, wealth or “social power” will be free to utilize their intelligence and hard work to achieve the desired success. And studies such as the those discussed in the essay will share a place in the dustbin of history.

I can’t hardly wait.

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