



The Development of Attitudes Towards the Homeless

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Introduction

Previous studies have examined adults' attitudes towards the homeless, but little research has looked at when these attitudes begin. However, determining when various attitudes towards the homeless develop is of interest for two primary reasons. From a theoretical standpoint, this information would help identify when the interaction between social and cognitive development that leads to negative perceptions of the homeless occurs. From an application standpoint, outlining the development of ideas about the homeless is essential so that interventions may be effectively instated in an attempt to combat people's negative perception of the homeless.

Previous research has found that children develop many of their ideas about the poor between ages 6 and 12 (e.g., Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Leahy, 1983); ideas about the homeless may develop around similar ages. Thus, the current study has examined how children aged 7 to 13 and some of their parents rate the homeless and non-homeless targets on measures of perceived warmth, perceived competence, social distancing, and empathy.

References:
Emler, H., & Dickinson, J. (1985). Children's representation of economic inequalities: The effects of social class. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 3, 191-198.
Leahy, R.L. (1983). Development of the conception of economic inequality: II. explanations, justifications, and concepts of social mobility and change. *Developmental Psychology*, 19, 111-125.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Child participants will rate non-homeless individuals more positively on all four attitudes (perceived warmth, perceived competence, social distancing, and empathy) than they will rate homeless individuals, but younger children will have less of a negative view of homeless people than will older children.

Hypothesis 2: No differences will be found between the 12-year-old and the parent samples for any of the attitudes examined.

Hypothesis 3: Within the children's sample, homeless males will be viewed more negatively than will homeless females on all four attitudes, especially among older children.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a positive correlation between parents' and their children's responses for all four attitudes.

Methods

Participants: 18 7- & 8-year olds (5 males, 13 females), 13 9- & 10-year olds (6 males, 7 females), 10 11-, 12-, & 13-year-olds (4 males, 6 females), and 11 parents of child participants (9 males, 1 female) from the Tacoma area.

Procedure: Participants were given brief descriptions of homeless and non-homeless people and then completed a 64-item questionnaire measuring how true they thought each item was. Four items measured each attitude, which were perceived warmth, perceived competence, social distancing, and empathy. Each item was presented four times with the target changing between a homeless man, a homeless woman, a non-homeless man, and a non-homeless woman.

Results: Hypothesis 1

Perceived Warmth

- Homeless targets were rated as less warm than non-homeless targets, $F_{(1, 38)} = 11.31, p < .01$.
- Men were rated as less warm than women, $F_{(1, 38)} = 12.83, p < .01$.
- 9-year-olds rated the homeless as less warm than did the 7-year-olds, $t_{(28)} = 2.74, p < .05$, and the 12-year-olds, $t_{(21)} = .20, p = .06$.
- No other significant interactions occurred.

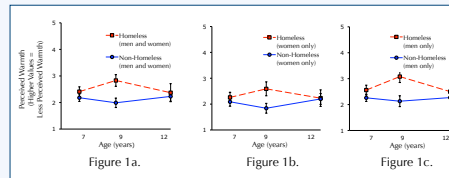


Figure 1. Mean perceived warmth ratings by the 7-, 9-, and 12-year-olds for men and women (a), women only (b), and men only (c).

Social Distancing

- Participants reported greater social distancing from homeless than from non-homeless targets, $F_{(1, 38)} = 40.91, p < .001$.
- Participants reported greater social distancing from the men than from the women, $F_{(1, 38)} = 3.93, p = .06$.
- 9-year-olds reported greater social distancing from the homeless than did the 7-year-olds, $t_{(29)} = 2.78, p < .05$.
- No other significant interactions occurred.

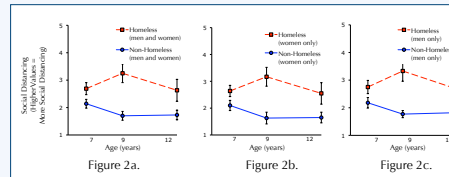


Figure 2. Mean social distancing ratings by the 7-, 9-, and 12-year-olds for men and women (a), women only (b), and men only (c).

Perceived Competence

- Homeless targets were rated as less competent than non-homeless targets, $F_{(1, 38)} = 16.10, p < .001$.
- No gender differences occurred.
- 9-year-olds rated the homeless as less competent than did the 7-year-olds, $t_{(29)} = 2.11, p < .05$.
- No other significant interactions occurred.

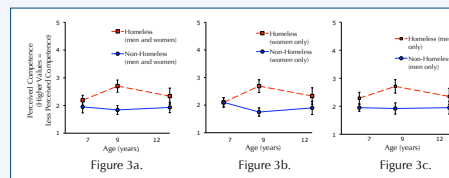


Figure 3. Mean perceived competence ratings by the 7-, 9-, and 12-year-olds for men and women (a), women only (b), and men only (c).

Empathy

- Participants had more empathy towards homeless than towards non-homeless targets, $F_{(1, 38)} = 40.01, p < .001$.
- No gender differences occurred.
- No significant interactions occurred.

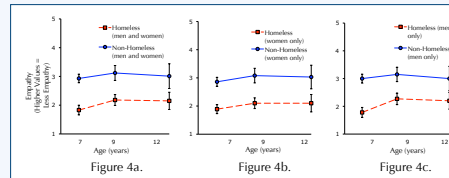


Figure 4. Mean empathy ratings by the 7-, 9-, and 12-year-olds for men and women (a), women only (b), and men only (c).

Results: Hypotheses 2-4

Parent and 12-year-old Comparisons

- There were no differences in how the 12-year-old and parent samples perceived targets for any of the attitudes. This was true for both male and female targets.

Comparisons of Homeless Men Versus Women

- Homeless men were viewed as less warm than homeless women, $F_{(1, 38)} = 10.10, p < .01$.
- Attitudes towards homeless men and women did not differ for any other attitudes.

Parent-Child Correlations

- Positive correlations between parents' and children's responses were found for:
 - *perceived warmth for homeless men, $r = .71, p < .05$
 - *perceived warmth for non-homeless women, $r = .63, p < .05$
 - *perceived competence for non-homeless men, $r = .69, p < .05$
- No other significant correlations were found.

Conclusions

- Relatively young children differentiate between homeless and non-homeless targets and have stereotypical reactions to the homeless.
- The homeless are viewed more negatively than the non-homeless on measures of perceived warmth, social distancing, and perceived competence. However, participants reported more empathy for homeless targets than for non-homeless targets.
- From age 7 to 9, children develop negative perceptions of the homeless and increase their desire to socially distance from the homeless.
- Twelve-year-olds and parents report the same attitudes towards both homeless and non-homeless targets.
- Socially desirable responding may affect 12-year-old and parents' reported perceptions of the homeless. However, socially desirable responding may not be in place before age 12.
- Nine-year-olds' stereotyping of the homeless can be measured using a questionnaire, although older children's reported attitudes may be affected by socially desirable responding. Additionally, different measures may be needed to detect stereotyping in younger children.
- Homeless men are perceived as less warm than women.
- Only a few correlations appeared between guardians' and children's responses, although the small sample size may have partly caused the lack of correlations.
- While even 7-year-olds may differentiate between homeless and non-homeless targets, their perceptions may not yet be as firmly established as by age 9. In order to most effectively combat negative attitudes towards the homeless, interventions should thus be applied prior to age 9.

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