South African children’s views of wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the understanding of wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment in South African Black (African) children aged 7, 9, 11 and 14 drawn from a rural, an urban and a semi-urban setting. Two hundred and twenty-five children (80 rural, 60 urban and 85 semi-urban) were interviewed individually in Setswana, their mother tongue. The urban children were living in a township in Pretoria, the semi-urban and the rural in the North West Province. The results show that the particulars of the children’s knowledge about wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment were influenced by their social environment. However, in line with previous studies, the results show that the children’s capacity to make inferences and integrate information about these concepts is more influenced by age than by their social milieu. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Most of the growing body of research into economic socialisation has been based within the neo-Piagetian tradition and describes stages which children have to pass through in order to gain a full understanding of a specific economic concept. Researchers differ on the number of stages required to achieve a full understanding, but as Furnham (1996) in a recent review points out, the emerging trend in recent studies is to summarise them into three levels, these being (1) no understanding (2) understanding of some isolated concepts (3) linking of isolated concepts to full understanding.

This stage approach has been criticised on the grounds that it limits the process of economic socialisation to a purely cognitive developmental one without taking into account the effects of the social and cultural influences. However, as Roland-Lévy (1990) argues, alternative approaches are not mutually exclusive: the cognitive-developmental approach “stresses intra-individual differences as the child grows up while the environmental learning approach is more successful in describing inter-individual variations at the same age. Both theories assume that contacts with social reality are necessary for the building up of a predictable pattern of behaviour” (Roland-Lévy, 1990, p. 471). Hence the importance of the child’s social milieu as a determinant variable in cognitive development is not denied. The building of knowledge can therefore be seen as a socio-cognitive process, which relies significantly on the culture and circumstances in which the child lives. This does not mean that the child is a passive recipient of cultural values or norms, but that through direct experience and in communication with others in society, the child actively constructs his or her own knowledge of the world. In the words of Stacey (1982, p. 161): “The development of socio-economic understanding can be conceptualised as an active and continuous process in which the young person constructs and tests ideas, knowledge, theories and practices”.

The present study explores the linked concepts of wealth, inequality and unemployment held by South African Black (African) children. Previous studies of this domain have been particularly valuable as they have gone beyond simply giving stage descriptions of the development of economic concepts and provided evidence relevant to two models of socialisation. Thus functionalist models (e.g. Parsons, 1960), which would predict considerable uniformity among the classes as to the nature and explanation of the causes of wealth and inequality, have been partially supported by studies such as those by Connel (1979), who found no consistent class differences in
Australian children’s reactions to inequality and Leahy (1981) who found few class differences in children’s descriptions of rich and poor people.

By way of contrast, dialectical models would predict considerable class differences as children construct the meaning of being rich and poor from their dealings with their immediate social environment. There is a considerable body of evidence for this view. Furnham (1987), for example, investigated the perception of economic justice among adolescents in Great Britain and in South Africa by reading out 16 descriptions of hypothetical workers and asking respondents to allocate monetary rewards. While both groups rewarded effort, ability and productivity, the South African subjects, who were white English speakers, remunerated the white workers more than the black workers, a result that reflects the reality of the economic world in which they lived.

In a similar vein, Emler and Dickinson (1985) studied children’s understanding of economic inequalities in a group of 7-to-12 year old Scottish children drawn from working class and middle class backgrounds. The children were asked to estimate the incomes of people in different occupations and to make judgements about the fairness of income differences. Emler and Dickinson found no age differences but substantial class differences. Middle class children made overall higher estimates of income for all the occupations considered and perceived a clearer division between the manual and non-manual occupations. Moreover the middle class children appeared to be more certain about the justice of such economic inequalities. The researchers maintain that these results reflect the dominant social representations within each social class which the child assimilates.

In another study, directly relevant to the present one, Roland-Lévy (1990) compared the economic socialisation of Algerian and French children and found that the dominant explanation for both poverty and wealth in Algerian children was the personal characteristics of the individual, whilst for their French counterparts it was the socio-economic system which was seen as mostly responsible for poverty. Whereas the French mentioned fate as responsible more for being rich than for being poor, the Algerians mentioned it more for being poor than for being rich. Interestingly, even though the Algerian children placed responsibility for being poor on the individual’s lack of effort and abilities as well as fate, they were also more aware than the French children of the power of the government in the country especially as far as unemployment was concerned.

This categorisation of explanations for poverty into personal (individualistic), structural (economic) and fatalistic (bad luck and fate), which is
derived from the work of Feagin (1975) has received considerable support in the literature (e.g., Feather, 1974; Furnham, 1982a). In general middle class adults and adolescents tend to favour individualistic explanations (Furnham, 1982a,b) whereas lower income groups and the less well educated favour structural explanations, though the cross-national differences found are not always easy to interpret (e.g., the finding reported in Lewis, Webley and Furnham (1995), that the Italians tend to blame societal factors, the Danes fate and the British the poor themselves). What is clear is that there are cultural differences in explanations for poverty: a relevant example being that, when adolescents explain poverty in the West Indies Barbadians place more stress on inequalities and injustices than Dominicans, though the latter are much poorer (Payne & Furnham, 1985).

Despite this support for a dialectical approach, cross-cultural studies in economic socialisation have found evidence of remarkable consistency of the pattern of development across countries. For example, in the Naive Economics Project, 900 children aged 8, 11 and 14 from Algeria, Australia, Denmark, Finland, West Germany, France, Israel, Norway, Poland and Yugoslavia were interviewed to establish their understanding and reasoning about various economic concepts, including their attitudes to poverty and wealth (Leiser, Sévón & Lévy, 1990). Averaging across countries, wealth differences were attributed by the children mainly to personal factors at all ages. The socio-economic system was the second most mentioned explanatory factor, but the importance of this surprisingly diminished with age. It must however be noted that children from the ten participating countries did give a variety of responses which may well have been due to their differing political and economic circumstances.

The purpose of the present study was to build on this previous research by investigating children’s understanding of economic inequalities in a society where there are enormous and entrenched differences in wealth based on racial grounds and where, in the past, social mobility for the poorer groups has been extremely limited. We hypothesised that younger (and rural) children would show more fatalism whereas older (and semi-urban and urban) children, through being radicalised, would be more likely to attribute inequality and its concomitants to the socio-economic system. We also hypothesised, based on the extensive research using the cognitive developmental approach, that older children would provide more complex explanations for inequality, poverty etc. than younger children. Three different locations: rural, urban and semi-urban, which will be described more fully later, were chosen because they provided very different social environments in which the
children were gathering their “economic knowledge” about the world: rural areas are generally extremely poor with high levels of unemployment, and such employment as there is involves migrant work; urban areas are also poor but with a greater range in the types of jobs available, while the semi-urban area chosen in this study was the more affluent. Thus, the interest of the present study lies in exploring the extent to which children’s understanding of poverty, wealth, inequality and unemployment is influenced by their specific local social environment and by their age.

2. Method

2.1. The samples

Three samples of South African Black Tswana children were drawn from a rural, an urban and a semi-urban setting. Two hundred and twenty-five children: 85 semi-urban, 80 rural and 60 urban, aged 7, 9, 11 and 14 years were interviewed individually in Setswana, their mother tongue. When this study was planned, each geographical sample was designed to include a similar break-down of subjects in each age group. However, the contract of the interviewer expired before the data for the urban 14 year olds were collected. Approximately an equal number of boys and girls was present in each of the three geographical samples and in each age group (see Table 1). These age groups were chosen in order to retain some degree of comparability with similar studies (e.g., Leahy, 1981).

Detailed demographic data about the areas from which the three samples were drawn is not available, since data of the 1996 Census has not yet been released, and for various reasons the data from previous ones is not reliable. Nevertheless, while no township is completely homogeneous in its socio-

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economic composition, the communities from which the three samples were
drawn can be characterised in the following way.

The rural sample comes from Suurman, a settlement about 90 km North of
Pretoria and is now part of the North West Province. This is the poorest of
the three samples, unemployment is very high, and the people in employment
work in town (usually in Pretoria but also as far as Johannesburg, 160 km) in
unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, mainly as domestic workers in white house-
holds. The Reconstruction and Development Programme set up by the new
government is working in the area to bring electricity and water and to feed
the children in the school. The school from which the children were recruited
had neither electricity nor water but was not the poorest in the area. All the
children in the first three years of school received food from the Recon-
struction and Development Programme.

Atteridgeville, a township on the outskirts of Pretoria provided the urban
sample of children. Atteridgeville was originally established in 1936 and has a
population of around 90,000. The most spoken languages are North Sotho
and Setswana. It has single men hostels which provide working force for
Pretoria Central. Atteridgeville has high levels of unemployment and housing
problems. The children were recruited from a school in the centre of Atte-
ridgeville and all the teachers as well as the children were native Setswana
speakers.

The semi-urban sample comes from a more affluent area, Ga-Rankuwa,
where unemployment is lower than in the other two areas studied. Ga-
Rankuwa lies about 20 km from the centre of Pretoria, and next to a
flourishing industrial site with several car factories, a hospital and a medical
university. Ga-Rankuwa also has many primary schools and several sec-
ondary schools. This is not to say that the children interviewed in this sample
have not been exposed to poverty either directly or indirectly (Bonn, 1995).
Most people in this area still live in the matchbox houses provided by the
previous government in the early 1960s when the people were resettled. The
children interviewed in this study where recruited from a school situated in
the centre of the location in one of the long-standing areas, Zone 5. The
school had water and electricity.

2.2. The interviews

Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was carried out in
Setswana (the children’s mother tongue) and later translated into English.
The interviewer was a student whose mother tongue was also Setswana. The
questions chosen for this interview had been piloted on a number of children
drawn from the three geographical areas from which the three samples were
drawn for the present study. Each child was interviewed individually and the
interview was taped. The interviews took place in each of the three schools
from which the children were recruited, sometimes in a shack adjacent to the
school but more often under a tree. For each sample, every age group was
recruited from single classrooms in each of the three schools. It was deemed
inappropriate to test the children’s I.Q.’s since the tests available in South
Africa at the moment for these age groups are not satisfactory for an African
population, instead through the teacher’s advice, the children chosen for the
present interviews were the “middle range achievers” in each class. No child
asked to take part in this study refused. The questions posed to each child
were open ended and each child was allowed to answer in his or her own way.

At first an attempt was made to code the data using the same category
system employed in similar studies (e.g. Leiser et al., 1990; Roland-Lévy,
1990). This categorisation proved to be inadequate for the present set of data
because too often the children’s answers overlapped more than one category
and the fit of the answers to the categories was poor. A more concrete cat-
egorisation of the data was therefore devised based on themes suggested by
the answers provided by the children. Many answers included more than one
causal category and so they were coded to reflect this. The content analysis
was carried out by the first author in consultation with the other authors. The
categories are self-explanatory, however definitions and examples are ob-
tainable from the first author. With some notable exceptions, the children’s
answers to the individual questions were rather terse, often consisting of no
more than a single sentence.

To test for reliability, the children’s responses were coded by two of the
authors independently (PW & MB) and reached a satisfactory 97% of
agreement for all the answers, ranging from 94% to 98%.

In order to test the children’s understanding of wealth, poverty, inequality
and unemployment, the following questions were asked in the same order:

- What does it mean to be rich?
- Who are the rich people?
- What does it mean to be poor?
- Why are there poor people?
- How come there are rich and poor people? (Why are some people poor
  while others are rich?)
- Can everybody become rich?
- What does unemployment mean?
• Why are people unemployed?
• What should a person do to get employment?

3. Results

The results will be presented in two main sections. In order to investigate the effect of the different environments on the children’s responses, qualitative comparisons were carried out between the answers of the children originating from the three geographical areas. In the second section, we report on the children’s capacity to integrate their responses into a progressively more complex system. The children’s answers were then analysed statistically to test for developmental differences and for differences between the three samples.

3.1. What does it mean to be rich?

The four most common responses given by the children from the three samples were as follows:
1. to have money: 56% (semi-urban); 61% (urban); 62% (rural);
2. to have luxuries (cars, double storey houses, etc.): 38% (semi-urban); 17% (urban); 19% (rural);
3. to be “adequate” – not to be in need: 15% (semi-urban); 10% urban; 8% (rural);
4. to own cattle: 16% (semi-urban); 1% (urban); 9% (rural).

Not surprisingly the meaning of being rich was mostly explained in terms of having money and possessions in all three samples, for example: “To be rich means having lots and lots of money”. When luxuries were mentioned: “Rich people are people with cars and houses, who live in luxury” or: “It means being rich, rich, rich, you have to have a double storey house, servants, cars and even a spaza (shop)”. For some children being rich meant to have enough to fulfil one’s needs, e.g.: “It means to be adequate, people who have enough”, in the words of another child: “Those who lack nothing, it means you don’t need anything else”. However, some children mentioned the traditional African view of wealth and possessions, in the words of a 14 year old girl from the semi-urban sample: “For the Tswanas, those who are rich are those who have cattle and as for the whites, the rich are those who have money”. It must be said, however, that often children did not see owning cattle and having money as mutually exclusive, and they were mentioned together.
3.2. Who are the rich people?

The four most frequent answers to this question were the following:
1. those who have lots of money: 32% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 17% (rural);
2. the Whites: 12% (semi-urban); 13% (urban); 25% (rural);
3. those who can afford luxuries: 16% (semi-urban); 13% (urban); 25% (rural);
4. people who are employed in certain jobs: 13% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 6% (rural).

The responses were very brief and to the point. A very common answer was that the rich were those who had a lot of money, e.g.: “People with money”, ... “Those who have money”, but while this was the most frequent answer among the semi-urban sample, far fewer of the urban and rural samples replied in this way. A more frequent response by the rural children was: “The Whites”, with 25% of them identifying the whites as being the rich. A few children, six altogether, qualified this statement by adding that some blacks were also rich: “The whites mostly but also a few Tswanas”. For some children, rich people were those who had luxuries: “Those who have cars”, “Those who have big expensive houses and nice furniture”. People employed in certain jobs were mentioned as examples of rich people by roughly a tenth of the children overall. The most common job referred to was that of a politician, usually the President, followed by doctors, musicians, teachers and lawyers. Specific people known to the children e.g., “Mr. Ngubane, who lives in the other street”, “Mr. Ntaite, he has a lot of cars”, were mentioned by 10% of the semi-urban children, 13% of the rural and 20% of the urban children.

3.3. What does it mean to be poor?

The five most common responses given by the children were:
1. having no money: 34% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 26% (rural);
2. having absolutely nothing; lacking everything: 30% (semi-urban); 34% (urban); 26% (rural);
3. to be starving; to have no food: 9% (semi-urban); 14% (urban); 21% (rural);
4. suffering: 18% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 18% (rural);
5. being unemployed: 12% (semi-urban); 14% (urban); 10% (rural);
“To be poor means having no money” was the simple and unremarkable response of many of the children. “Being poor means to have nothing”, ... “Being poor means to lack just everything, to have no possessions of your own” or just “To be lacking” were also very common replies. To be poor meant having no food and to starve, especially so to the rural children, “To be unable to afford even mielie-meal (staple food) ... to have to go to bed hungry”, “To be poor means ... a person who has no tomatoes, no food, who has to go around picking up food”, but to a much lesser extent to the children in the other two samples. Children also often replied succinctly that being poor meant the all encompassing concept of “Suffering”, “Being poor means to suffer”, and around 18% of the children in all the three samples mentioned this.

3.4. Why are there poor people?

The four most frequent responses given by the children to this question were the following:
1. because of unemployment: 21% (semi-urban); 39% (urban); 43% (rural);
2. because people have no money: 18% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 20% (rural);
3. because it is God's will: 10% (semi-urban); 8% (urban); 13% (rural);
4. because of lack of education: 11% (semi-urban); 3% (urban); 9% (rural).

We have poor people because of unemployment was the most frequent answer from all children, the following are some of their replies: “Because they are not working, there are no jobs”, another: “They are unemployed and they have no money” and ... “Because these are the people who cannot find employment”. The tautological reply that there are poor people because they have no money: “They are poor because they don’t have money”, was also quite common and it appeared in all three samples in an equal measure. God was seen as being responsible for the existence of poverty by some children; in their own words: “God has made it so”; “Because God has His own reasons”, and from another child: “Because God has created us and said let there be rich and poor people”. For some children, poverty was caused by lack of education: “People are poor because they are unemployed and illiterate, instead of going to school they ran away”; in the words of another child, “Because they were unable to go to school” and another: “Because they are not educated enough, most of the time they are those who did not go to school”. A few children referred to South African history as the cause for exploitation and poverty, in the words of one
child: “It is because our forefathers used to be servants to the whites and were paid only with food and so they did not have money to educate their children, so we have poor people, because they did not have the chance to go to school”.

3.5. How come we have rich and poor people? Why are some people poor while others are rich?

The five most common responses were the following:
1. due to unemployment: 14% (semi-urban); 21% (urban); 31% (rural);
2. because it is God’s will: 9% (semi-urban); 20% (urban); 25% (rural);
3. people have unequal amounts of money: 19% (semi-urban); 18% (urban); 12% (rural);
4. education/lack of it: 13% (semi-urban); 5% (urban); 5% (rural);
5. difference in individual efforts/characteristics: 1% (semi-urban); 8% (urban); 1% (rural).

Inequality is due to unemployment, was the most common reply, especially from the rural children, quoting some children’s answers: “Because the rich worked and the poor did not have a job” ... “Because some are not working and some got employment” ... “Some are employed and some cannot get work, there are not enough jobs”. The fatalistic view that inequality was part of God’s plan for mankind, was also more prevalent among the rural children: “Because God made it so”; ... “It is God’s decision”, another: “Jesus made those who have things as the rich and those who don’t have things as the poor”, and another child: “God has made it like that and that is how it will and shall be”. Education and lack of it was seen as the reason for the existence of poor and rich people by more children in the semi-urban sample than in the other two samples; in their own words: “The rich are educated while the poor are illiterate”, ... “The rich are those whose parents sent them to school, the poor are those whose parents did not have money to do so”, ... “The Whites went to school and they are the rich”, ... “The rich are well educated, do you understand, you can be a doctor or a lawyer and you are in moneys and the poor are those who did not go to school, sometimes they just run away and now they are at home doing nothing”. A few children in the urban sample referred to a different attitude to work of the poor and the rich, the poor are lazy while the rich are enterprising: “The poor are lazy and don’t want to think of anything they can do, the rich are always busy and thinking of something, they always have a goal”.
3.6. Can everybody become rich?

The vast majority of children (70%) answered negatively and elucidated their replies by giving the following reasons: because of unemployment, lack of education and individual differences. The following are some examples of their replies: “No, because some people are unemployed” ... and: “No, there are some who do not have qualification, they did not go to school and so they are unemployed” ... and: “No, some are too lazy to work”.

The children who answered in the affirmative (30%) expanded and qualified their statements by adding that everyone can become rich provided certain conditions are present: if everyone is in employment ... “Yes, if we all can find a job, if we could all work”; if everyone has a good education ... “Yes, if we can study and get a good education like everybody else”; if people work hard, perform well and save ... “Yes, if people work hard, report daily to work, be positive and save” and if it is God’s will ... “Yes, if we pray to God and He listens to us”.

Noteworthy is the difference between the three samples regarding their positive outlook; while nearly half (46%) of the semi-urban children answered that given the right circumstances everybody has a chance to become rich, only 22% of the rural and 18% of the urban children thought so.

3.7. What does unemployment mean?

The four most common responses provided by the children to this question were:
1. having no job: 65% (semi-urban); 65% (urban); 55% (rural);
2. “suffering”: 0% (semi-urban); 19% (urban); 19% (rural);
3. being lazy – lack of individual’s effort: 12% (semi-urban); 4% (urban; 4% (rural);
4. lack of education and skills: 6% (semi-urban); 7% (urban); 7% (rural).

Most children in all three samples described unemployment as having no job and staying at home) e.g.: “Someone who is not working is unemployed”, or: “To be without a job and staying at home”, in another child’s words: “It means a person who sits around the house and has had no job for ever”. Unemployment meant “Suffering” to 19% of the rural and urban children, while this definition was non-existent in the semi-urban sample. Most of the replies in this category consisted of one single word: “Suffering”. Some children, especially in the semi-urban sample, reported characteristics of individuals when asked about the meaning of unemployment, for example:
“When a person does not look for employment, sits at home and likes to do nothing” ... “It means a lazy person, a person who hates to work” and in the words of another child: “It means that people are lazy and do not really care about work”. A few children in all three samples referred to lack of education and skills in their replies to this question: “It means you did not go to school and you don’t have enough qualifications for a job” ... and another: “Jobs are scarce lately and sometimes people just do not have enough school qualifications to get jobs”.

3.8. Why are people unemployed?

The four most common responses provided by the children to the above question were:
1. lack of individual effort: 35% (semi-urban); 30% (urban); 15% (rural);
2. lack of education and skills: 23% (semi-urban); 17% (urban); 14% (rural);
3. lack of vacancies: 20% (semi-urban); 6% (urban); 14% (rural);
4. fate – God’s will: 6% (semi-urban); 15% (urban); 15% (rural).

Lack of effort and enterprise was seen as the main cause for unemployment more by the semi-urban and urban children than by the rural ones; quoting from the children’s answers: “These people never had any intention of going to work” ... “After completing their studies, they decided they no longer wanted to go and work” ... “Some are lazy and just do not want to go around looking for work” ... “Because they do not want to go to look for work, they prefer to stay at home, it is nicer”. The next most common response to this question was lack of education and appropriate skills: “Because they are not educated” ... “These are people who reached Standard 4 or Standard 5 and could not carry on because of lack of money, so they cannot get employment because employers nowadays are looking for educated people” ... “Some did not complete their studies and they don’t have the necessary qualifications”, and from another child: “Like myself, if I may use an example, let us say I drop out of school and stay at home, there will be no one who is going to give me a job because I will not be qualified”. Lack of vacancies and job opportunities were seen as causes for unemployment by children in all three samples, but more frequently by the semi-urban children: “Because there are a lot of people who are seeking employment and there are not enough vacancies” ... “In South Africa there are too many people looking for a job and not everybody can get employment, there are not enough jobs for the whole population”. Fatalistic reasons were the cause of unemployment, according to some children, especially children from the rural and urban samples:
“Because God says, now there are no jobs, but may be next week” ... “When God is not around to look after them, they don’t get a job”.

3.9. What should a person do to get employment?

The most common replies were the following:
1. individual’s responsibility: 62% (semi-urban); 56% (urban); 59% (rural);
2. get education: 25% (semi-urban); 20% (urban); 15% (rural);
3. seek assistance from others: 6% (semi-urban); 10% (urban); 15% (rural);
4. prepare work documentation: 8% (semi-urban); 12% (urban); 6% (rural).

Most children in all three samples indicated that it was the responsibility of the individual to actively engage in searching for employment: “He must go around to look and ask for a job, because otherwise no one else is going to do it for him” ... “She must look around, ask and look till she finds a job even if it is a piece job” ... “Read the papers to find out who is employing” ... “They must go to town and just ask around if there are jobs going” ... “In Setswana we usually say – Mokodue go itsosa a itsosang – (= only a person who tries can be helped), so it’s up to each and every one of us to go out every morning to try to get a job”.

Children also thought that in order to get employed, people ought to get education and acquire skills: “They must go to school first, then with their qualifications they are going to get a job.” ... “You must study until Standard 10 and get an exemption, that is a guarantee to secure you a good post”. Seeking assistance from others (neighbours, friends), with the view of getting employed was mentioned more frequently by the rural children: “You must ask your friends if they know of any vacancies.” ... “My mother told my father to go to Pindi our neighbour, she knew where they needed a gardener”, whereas the formal activities of filling in documents, preparing papers, getting one’s Identity Card, were more commonly mentioned by urban children: “You must fill in forms, show them what you do, and get your Identity Card ready” ... “You must go to that office, I don’t know what it is called, and you ask for an Identity Card and then you tell the social worker you want to get a job”.

The next step in the analysis of the data was to code each child’s answers for the overall complexity of their explanations. Five mutually exclusive categories reflecting different levels of complexity of explanations were identified from the answers.

When the child’s answers showed no coherence in their explanations or responded in a tautological manner or with “Don’t Know”, their index of complexity was coded as non-existent (zero). Explanations reflecting only one
causal factor, e.g., wealth, poverty and unemployment are “Because of God” were coded as “simple explanations” (level 1). When the child offered multiple but isolated single causal links without attempting to integrate them and form a relation between them, the answers were coded as “multiple simple” (level 2). If the child’s answers linked at least two factors and inferred relations in a causal link, they were coded as level 3 “causal chain”. An example of level 3 reasoning would be “lack of education leads to unemployment which in turn leads to poverty”. The most complex level of explanation was one in which the child’s answers articulated a more integrated set of explanations and also offered abstract economic and political relations (coded as level 4 “integrated explanations”).

Protocols were rated by two judges (MB & PW) and inter-judge reliability reached a satisfactory 92.5% level of agreement.

The ratings of complexity were then tested for developmental differences and for differences between the three samples.

Tables 2–4 present the data in the form of contingency tables with two ordered variables. In Table 2 the variables are complexity of explanation, in order of increasing complexity, and area in the order of rural, urban and semi-urban. In Tables 3 and 4 the ordered variables are complexity of explanation and the children’s ages. In each case the prediction is that of a positive association or correlation between the two ordered variables, i.e. in Table 2 complexity of explanation should increase as the area changes from rural to urban and then semi-urban, while in Tables 3 and 4, complexity of explanation should increase as age increases. These monotonic trends should be manifested by relatively high frequencies in the cells along the negative diagonals of the contingency tables.

An appropriate test for a monotonic trend in contingency tables with two ordered variables is given by Marascuilo and McSweeney (1977, pp. 446–449). This test is based on a development of Kendall’s $S$ statistic, from which Kendall’s tau is calculated (Kendall, 1948). The test provides a descriptive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>No coherent explanation</th>
<th>Simple explanation</th>
<th>Multiple simple explanation</th>
<th>Causal chain</th>
<th>Integrated explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Urban</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The cell entries show the number of children achieving each level of complexity of explanation.
measure of the predicted trend or correlation between two ordered variables, given by the correlation coefficient Kendall’s tau, and a test of the significance of the trend given by a normal deviate value Z (for full details see Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977). All the calculations reported here have included the appropriate corrections for tied ranks.

Applying this test to the data presented in Table 2, complexity of explanation by area, gives $\tau = +0.160$, $Z = 2.804$, $p < 0.005$ on a one directional test. The use of a one directional test is legitimate since the direction of the trend was predicted. Although the correlation is significant, it is nevertheless low, as may be expected from the scatter of the data away from the cells in the negative diagonal.

Table 3
The relationship between children’s age and complexity of explanation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No coherent explanation</th>
<th>Simple explanation</th>
<th>Multiple simple explanation</th>
<th>Causal chain</th>
<th>Integrated explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The cell entries show the number of children achieving each level of complexity of explanation.*

Table 4
The relationship between children’s age and complexity of explanation in the three different samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No coherent explanation</th>
<th>Simple explanation</th>
<th>Multiple simple explanation</th>
<th>Causal chain</th>
<th>Integrated explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Urban sample |
| 7   | 4                       | 14                 | 2                           |              |                         |
| 9   | 3                       | 8                  | 8                           | 1            |                         |
| 11  | 3                       | 7                  | 10                          |              |                         |

| Semi-urban sample |
| 7   | 8                       | 9                  | 4                           | 1            |                         |
| 9   | 3                       | 7                  | 4                           | 6            | 2                       |
| 11  | 2                       | 5                  | 11                          | 3            |                         |
| 14  | 3                       | 7                  | 10                          |              |                         |

*Note: The cell entries show the number of children achieving each level of complexity of explanation.*
Analysis of Table 3, complexity of explanation by age, combined over the three area samples, gave the following results, $\tau = +0.566$, $Z = 10.405$, $p < 0.001$, thus showing that there is a strong and highly significant positive correlation between the age of the children and the complexity of explanations they use. Similar results are obtained from Table 4 which presents the data for complexity of explanation by age separately for rural, urban and semi-urban children. For the rural sample $\tau = +0.565$, $Z = 6.016$, $p < 0.001$, for the urban sample $\tau = +0.575$, $Z = 5.052$, $p < 0.001$, and for the semi-urban sample, $\tau = +0.598$, $Z = 6.673$, $p < 0.001$, thus for each of the three area samples presented in Table 4, there is a strong and highly significant positive correlation between complexity of explanation and increasing age. The predicted correlations between complexity of explanation and the three geographical areas, and between complexity of explanation and the children’s age, are present in the data and are statistically significant, however, the correlation between complexity of explanation and the geographical areas is low while the correlations between complexity of explanation and age are strong. It can be concluded that the complexity of explanation is better predicted by the age of the children than by the areas in which they lived.

4. Discussion

The descriptive analyses of the results indicate that children’s views about wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment show some differences in the three samples suggesting that the children have selected information linked to their specific social milieu as proposed by the dialectical model. For example, unemployment was seen as an important cause of poverty and inequality by nearly half of the rural sample in whose daily experience unemployment is very high, while the children of the more prosperous semi-urban sample were less conclusive about its role. Interestingly, the rural children combined a fatalistic outlook with their social evaluations and viewed God nearly as accountable as unemployment, for inequality and poverty. In contrast, the semi-urban children regarded lack of education and individual characteristics as more responsible. The children’s definitions of poverty and wealth reflected the relative poverty and wealth of their experiences and surroundings. Reflecting the children’s very real experience of growing up in South Africa was the reply that the rich are the Whites. This was the most frequent response from the rural children, in whose community everyone is poor, but it
was less common among the semi-urban children, whose environment provided them with evidence that Blacks could also become rich. Indeed semi-urban children referred to individual differences in wealth and potentials.

There are many similarities as well as differences between the results of this study and those obtained by other researchers in the same field. Roland-Lévy (1990) reported that both Algerian and French children made a distinction between poverty and unemployment. Goldstein and Oldham (1979) showed that children explained both poverty and wealth in terms of work related answers. Berti and Bombi (1988) and Danzinger (1958) report that from the age of seven, children associate work with money. In this study, poverty and inequality were clearly related to lack of work by most children, however wealth was not seen as deriving directly from employment. Given the peculiarities of the South African situation, it may be unwise to expect too direct similarities with results obtained in different contexts.

Roland-Lévy (1990) found that Algerian children (more than their French counterparts) mentioned fate as being responsible for being poor, similarly children in this study, especially in the rural sample, linked God’s will to inequality. The more pronounced fatalistic attitude to inequality of the rural sample, which was the most deprived of the three, may reflect a feeling of hopelessness arising from their economically more oppressed status as well as reflecting the fact that the rural population is less politically awakened.

While differences between the three samples were visible in the distinctive information chosen by the children relating economic concepts to their experiences in the environment, the social milieu appeared to have had only a marginal effect on the children’s capacity to integrate them. Age had a stronger impact on the capacity to integrate and formulate causal links and consequences between the different economic concepts. This result is in line with the cognitive-developmental model suggested by previous research in the field.

Leahy (1981, p. 121) explains the developmental differences found in the conceptions of inequality in his study by postulating that while in early childhood only the “elements making up the system” are emphasised, later on in adolescence “the factors that regulate the system” are also taken into account.

The descriptive analyses of this study show that the particulars of the children’s knowledge about wealth, poverty, inequality and unemployment are influenced by their environment. Their expressions of these concepts reflect the social reality in which they live. However, the correlational analysis shows that the children’s capacity to make inferences and integrate infor-
mation about these concepts is more influenced by age than by their social milieu. Thus one can conclude that the social environment affects the expression of these concepts but that their integration is age related.

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