

The big problem with one of the most popular assumptions about the poor

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The Washington Post:

In the late 1960s, Walter Mischel, a researcher at Stanford University, invited several hundred children to participate in a game in which they were given a choice: They could eat one sweet right away, or wait and have two a little later. Initially, the goal was simple: to see how and why people (kids in this case) delayed gratification. But after the end of the experiment, Mischel began to check in with as many of the participants' families as he could, and over the following decade he learned that his little experiment probably had much larger implications than he had anticipated.

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“When resources are low and scarce, the rational decision is to take the immediate benefit and to discount the future gain,” said Melissa Sturge-Apple, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester who studies child development. “When children are faced with economic uncertainty, impoverished conditions, not knowing when the next meal is, etc. — they may be better off if they take what is in front of them.”

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To some, this might seem like a question of willpower, but that's likely a bit shortsighted. Assuming the poor are more prone to impulsivity doesn't properly consider the severe circumstances in which many are forced to live, and how those circumstances shape a person's rational behavior.

“When you grow up in these types of environments, you're effectively being trained to eat when you can instead of when you're hungry,” Sarah Hill, who teaches psychology at Texas Christian University, told The Washington Post earlier this year.

Read the whole story: [The Washington Post](#)