I'm rich. You must be, too.

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“Let me tell you about the very rich,” the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in the 1920s. “They are different from you and me.”

“Yes,” his friend and rival Ernest Hemingway replied. “They have more money.”

Hemingway’s retort may be apocryphal, but the point is indisputable. Then as now, the rich have much more money than you and me, and they have more money in part because they don’t give it away. The very wealthy are disproportionately opposed to any policy—including tax policies—that would redistribute wealth more equitably.

This makes sense from a purely economic perspective. Such redistribution policies do not serve the self-interest of those who have, so the wealthy align themselves with political parties that oppose wealth redistribution.

But is there more to it than rational self-interest? Perhaps so, says psychological scientist Rael Dawtry of the University of Kent, UK. Working with colleagues at Kent and the University of Aukland, Dawtry has been studying a psychological mechanism called social sampling, which may play an important part in reinforcing attitudes and policies favoring the preservation of wealth.

Social sampling is one way we all assess the world. We don’t have accurate information about everyone, so we sample from our own social circle. The problem is that this sample of the world may not actually be representative of the larger world, so we get a skewed sense of others’ lives. This, Dawtry suggests, may be going on with wealth. That is, the wealthy live in a rather insular sub-society, where most everyone is affluent. Based on their own experience and their impression of neighbors and colleagues who are just as well off, they calculate that wealth in the larger society is much higher than it is in fact. This misperception gets more distorted the wealthier one becomes, and it leads down the road to distorted attitudes—that the world is fairer than it is in fact—and ultimately to anti-egalitarian political and policy views.

At least that’s the scientists’ hypothesis, which they decided to test in a couple studies. They asked a group of middle-aged Americans their own household income, and then asked them to estimate the distribution of incomes in their immediate social circle and in the wider population. They also answered questions about how fair and satisfactory their perceived society to be, and finally they indicated whether or not they supported efforts to redistribute wealth through taxes on the rich. In different versions of this study, the scientists controlled for political views and for perceived self-interest, so they could measure the effects of sampling over and above these more obvious influences.

The results supported the scientists’ hypothesis. Personal income clearly shaped views on tax policy, but in a roundabout way. That is, wealthier (relative to poorer) Americans reported moving in wealthier social circles, and extrapolated from this experience in estimating average wealth across America. In turn, these estimates led to perceived fairness of wealth distribution in America—and to opposition to redistributive tax policies. Dawtry and colleagues ran other versions of this study—including one in New Zealand—with the same basic conclusion.

Let’s be clear. The findings confirmed the obvious—that self-interest and ideology are important contributors to the differing economic attitudes of wealthy and poor. But they also demonstrated the importance of another, less obvious psychological mechanism, social sampling. These results suggest that the rich and the poor do not simply have different views about wealth redistribution. They subjectively experience living in different worlds. Thus, in the relatively affluent American inhabited by wealthier Americans, there is less need to distribute wealth more equally.

These findings, reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, are not particularly hopeful. Indeed, the scientists see this psychological phenomenon as antagonistic to political efforts to reduce inequality. As inequality grows—as it has been over decades—wealth is more concentrated geographically, creating enclaves of political perception and preference.

What’s more, the human tendency to sample undermines rational political thought. It assumes one’s small social circle is representative of wider society, creating a “false consciousness.” Such biased thinking makes it very difficult to realistically appraise economic realities—or in the end to engage in rational decision making.

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