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Survey Research Proposal

# Executive summary.

Sociologists and other social scientists attempt to understand what positive and negative evaluations of the same objects in different social contexts reveal about the underlying social structure. One aspect of this broader theme is the question of when people perceive wealth positively and when people perceive wealth negatively. In what visual contexts do people perceive expensive cars, symbols of wealth, as well-deserved, legitimate, and oriented at needs or enjoyment? In what racial contexts do they perceive expensive cars as underserved, suspect in origin, and oriented at impressing others or pretending a higher social status? In my research, I aim to answer these questions. The problem of wealth perception is especially important in the United States, where negative stereotypes about minorities are used to justify their low economic position in society and spatial segregation from the majority. The results of my research could reveal what some of the currently prevailing implicit racial biases (automatic processes that activate positive or negative attitudes or bring associations of certain attributes when people think about racial groups; Fazio & Olson, 2003) regarding wealth.

To collect data, I will conduct a 10-minute survey of about 100-300 respondents and a 15-minute follow-up interview with five participants. Based only on pictures, the respondents will be asked to make judgements of the role of the car and of the character traits of the owner having to do with legitimacy, deservedness, and honesty. The first point of comparison will be the visible traits of the car owner (gender, age, race, ethnicity). The second visual point of comparison will be the race and ethnicity of people present on the streets on which cars are located. The third point of comparison will be whether the streets project poor or wealthy neighborhoods in terms of upkeep, trash, and size and condition of houses and buildings. Interviewees will elaborate on the reasons and motivations behind their answers to the survey.

This design can reveal potential implicit biases about wealthy individuals based on gender, age, race, and ethnicity. Due to the relational nature of the data, I will rely on a convenience non-probability sample collected via messages to mailing lists and online chats. To analyze the data, I will run regressions on the sums of combined scores of traits selected by respondents. Race, ethnicity, gender, and age of the car owner will be the independent variables, and other relevant visual clues in the pictures will serve as control variables. Insights from the open-ended follow-up interviews will guide the interpretation of the quantitative results.

# Research question.

What do positive and negative evaluations of the same objects in different social contexts reveal about the underlying social structure? In what contexts do people perceive wealth positively, and in what contexts do people perceive wealth negatively?In what visual contexts do people perceive expensive cars, a form of visible wealth, as well-deserved, legitimate, and oriented at needs or enjoyment, and in what contexts do people perceive expensive cars as undeserved, suspect in origin, and oriented at impressing others or pretending a higher social status?

My primary independent variables will be the race and ethnicity of the car owner, the dominant race of the neighborhood in which the car is shown, and the apparent social class level of the neighborhood in which a car is shown. My dependent variables will be summed responses to questions on a semantic differential scale judging the role of the car and traits of character of the owner having to do with legitimacy, deservedness, and honesty.

My main hypotheses are the following:People will be suspicious of the origin of wealth supporting expensive cars in poor and minority neighborhoods. People will associate having an expensive car in a poor neighborhood with impressing others and pretending a higher social status or illegal occupations such as drug trafficking. People will make more negative judgements of owners who are males, young, and of minority race and ethnicity.

1. **Background and significance**.

Wealth can be socially divisive, as a source of envy, differential power and status, and a cause for malfeasance, fighting, and war. At the same time, people admire wealth and see it as a sign of a good moral character (Black and Davidai, 2020, p. 2). The stereotypes and ways the current social order and the distribution of wealth in America is justified involve narratives about people earning their own way and getting rich through their own effort and skills. In turn, those occupying lower positions in the social hierarchy are not always perceived as just less fortunate; rather, they are often considered those unwilling to work hard, creating disorder, and engaging in criminal behavior.

Beliefs about wealth are related to racism against black Americans. In the South, blacks faced legal discrimination (they practically could not own property, trade, testify in courts, or vote), which gave rise to biases (Baradaran, 2017, p. 18). Blacks moving to the North during the Great Migration at the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries were segregated and separated from white communities in industrializing cities like Chicago (Baradaran, 2017, p. 11). Largely due to deindustrialization, areas where black people live have become impoverished, and blackness has been associated with poverty—in a society that ascribes economic success or failure to traits of character. Consequently, blacks, supposedly lacking skills and morals, were not trusted enough to be bankers (Baradaran, 2017, p. 195). They were even avoided as neighbors, as real estate values dropped with the inflow of new black residents (Baradaran, 2017, p. 91).

Considering beliefs about wealth in relation to racism is important, because perceptions of visible wealth shape social interactions. People visually communicate their wealth when they choose more expensive items from among those comparable in terms of functionality (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996). Expensive watches in China are an example of symbolic items that “have a role of representing the social status of users,” draw lines between the wealthy and the middle class, and “reinforce the society network” (Wang and Yamashita, 2018, p. 10; pp. 15-16). Palma et al. (2017) find that prestige seeking may drive even food consumption. Niklas and Sadik-Zada (2019) demonstrate a significant relationship between income inequality and the volume of fine wine imports, supporting theories proposing wine to be a status symbol and a form of investment that facilitates entering wealthy elite networks (pp. 365-6).

People make judgements on owners of expensive items. Black and Davidai (2020) find that positive traits of character are attributed to the rich when they spend their money on good causes more often than when they spend it on luxury products. The authors propose that people infer virtuousness from charitable spending and then further attribute material success to hard work or entrepreneurship (p. 2). Thus, luxury cars may raise questions as to the deservedness of wealth of their owners. This suspicion may, in turn, be stronger in case of minority owners.

Cassi P. Claytor, the author of *Black Privilege*, argues that black people face the judgements that they “neither can afford nor do they deserve to own luxurious things, to be served, or to partake in leisure,” and “they are viewed as undesirable or unworthy (Claytor, 2020, p. 32, 105). Such beliefs stem from “stereotypes about blacks being poor and criminal” or “illegitimate” (Claytor, 2020, 172). Thus, expensive items they possess may signal different kinds of social status to different parts of society. Young black entrepreneurs happen to be suspected of criminal activities simply based on their visible wealth (Claytor, 2020, p. 80, 172). Moreover, “in the past, blacks might have purchased older car models rather than new cars in order to prevent white resentment of black success, which could prove dangerous” (Claytor, 2020, 172). At the same time, blacks “spen[t] roughly 30 percent more on visible goods than whites” in order to “ameliorate their low societal standing,” which indicates opposite dynamics depending on whether the blacks or the whites are the group of comparison (Claytor, 2020, 153).

My project will revisit the problem of wealth perception and judgements of individuals based on what they possess. By juxtaposing a symbol of wealth with the race of persons and spaces in different visual combinations, my research design can reveal implicit assumptions about the deservedness of wealth possessed by people of color. McLean et al. (2021) point to the importance of “identify[ing] aspects of the shared social context that contain cultural patterns of implicit racial bias,” which may depend on cues, or “informational pattern[s] embedded within a situation or culture” (pp. 127; 114). Social judgements depend on “people’s preexisting knowledge, memories, and ideas about the world (Forgas et al. 2003, p. 4). What adds importance to the study of social judgements on wealth and race is that they not only originate from the world but also shape it: “the construction of those biased contexts results from the operation of human minds” (McLean, 2021, p. 115). Thus, by assessing people’s built-in assumptions, my study will help better understand the underpinnings of the social reality surrounding wealth and race.

1. **Qualifications**.

I am a master's student at the Social Sciences Division concentrating in sociology. Prior to coming to the University of Chicago, I studied Economics at Harvard University. My senior thesis was on the economically significant cultural consequences of the Partitions of Poland (1815-1918). For the project, I performed spatial data analysis on an own online survey of 3150 participants living within 60 km from the historical Prussian/Russian border. While I mostly found weak to no differences, one result that remained consistent across specifications was a higher level of social capital in former Prussia. This finding suggests long-term socioeconomic effects of persistence of historical social mobilization of an oppressed population. At the University of Chicago, I have taken Survey Research Methods course, where I have learned from the expertise of the leaders of survey research.

*(I must note that the content of this paragraph is not true; I came up with this for the completeness of my proposal):* An analysis of the results of the present study will be an essential part for my MA thesis. I am planning to write my master’s thesis on the role symbols play in space and how this reveals underlying social structures in the contemporary United States. As I am planning to apply to doctoral programs in sociology, the project will not only enrich my researcher portfolio, but it will also be an important step forward in my career. I hope that my findings will foster discussion in academic circles and beyond about the dynamics behind implicit racial and ethnic prejudices.

# Research Design and Methods

1. **Method**

My approach is a combination of a standardized survey of 100-300 respondents and a follow-up qualitative interview with 5 survey participants. The survey, by eliciting judgements about cars and their owners presented in pictures, will be designed to be able to reveal potential implicit biases in the United States about wealthy individuals based on races and ethnicities. The follow-up interviews will help me understand reasons and motivations behind the answers to the survey. The purpose is explanatory: the goal is to understand relationships rather than to measure exactly how strong the biases are in the population or how they differ across groups in the population.

1. **Sampling**.

Since I intend to collect correlational data, I can rely on a convenience sample to maximize the sample size in the survey. I will send out messages with the survey link to mailing lists (listservs), online chatrooms, and university student groups. To increase participation, I will send two follow-up messages. I will collect email addresses of those who have already filled the survey to make it harder for a single person to take the survey more than once. To prevent bots from taking the survey, I will insert a reCAPTCHA. I will also eliminate responses that were taken too fast or included patterns such as straight-lining. To incentivize participation in the survey, I will offer a $100 Amazon gift card delivered to a single raffle winner. The winner will be contacted via email, and the card will be accessed through a link. To incentivize participation in the interview, I will offer a $20 Amazon gift card to each interviewee.

1. **Instrument(s).**

My survey will be programmed into Qualtrics, an online survey platform. While I have developed the survey from scratch, its main questions come in the format of a semantic differential scale, and the demographic questions are loosely inspired by similar items in existing surveys. Pictures in the survey will come in a random order and will be shown one at a time. Questions about each character trait will be displayed individually. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. The interview guide is developed from scratch and directly related to the survey questions. The interview should take about 15 minutes. Participation in the survey is one-time. Participation in the interview is one-time and for select survey participants who agreed to be invited to the interview. I will pretest the instruments by asking friends to take part in the survey and in the interview.

1. **What is your operational plan?**

I will do all the work on my own. I will approach and seek to recruit respondents with emails sent out to listservs, online chats, and university student groups. The emails will indicate that this is a picture-based 10-minute survey that supports a student project. In the case of interviews, I will contact potential participants via email and set up a phone call or a virtual meeting. I will use Amazon gift cards as incentives, promised in the outreach emails and delivered via email links. In case the initial effort is not successful, I will follow up with two additional emails. In case this is still insufficient, I will look for more listservs, online chats, and student groups. I will track my efforts by having a list of email addresses of those who have completed the survey. I will download the data and analyze in R on my computer. I will delete names and all other identifiers after my analysis. The risks do not exceed those of daily life.

1. **Analysis**.

I will run regressions. The race, ethnicity, gender, and age of the car owner will be the independent variables. Other relevant visual clues of the picture will serve as control variables. The dependent variables will take the form of the sums of combined scores of traits selected by respondents along the underlying spectrum from decisively negative to decisively positive. The interpretation of the quantitative results will be guided by the insights from interviews. The analysis will be visualized with histograms showing traits of character attributed to each race and ethnicity. Moderate to strong correlations between negative judgements and minority identities, men, and young people will confirm my hypotheses. Finding weak or zero such correlations will call into question my hypotheses. Finding correlations in the opposite direction will be evidence disconfirming my hypotheses. There is a possibility that some respondents may guess that race plays a role in the study and may thus avoid racist responses. This possibility will potentially make effects harder to detect; however, the results will presumably be more conclusive if detected.

**Appendices (outside the maximum page limit) include:**

# Questionnaire.

Mode: self-administered online

***Introduction:***

This short survey (about 10 minutes) is part of research into the ways social context may affect meaning. You will specifically be asked for your feelings when you see pictures of cars and their owners taken in an urban setting. Your honest first reactions are appreciated.

Your participation is voluntary. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer. You can end your participation at any time. Your identity will remain confidential. You answers will only be reported in summary form.

Once you complete the survey, you will receive a link to a page where you can provide contact information. Please enter and submit the information if you wish to participate in a raffle for a $100 Amazon gift card.

At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to volunteer to elaborate conversationally on your reactions to the pictures in a conversational phone interview of about fifteen minutes. Those who are selected and take part in that follow up will receive a thank-you of $20 each.

Contact with the researcher: [uchicagoproject123456789@gmail.com](mailto:uchicagoproject123456789@gmail.com)

For questions, concerns, or suggestions about human subjects research, or for questions about the rights of research participants, please contact the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board:  
Phone: 773-702-2915 (Director)  
Email: [cdanton@uchicago.edu](mailto:cdanton@uchicago.edu) (Director) or [sbs-irb@uchicago.edu](mailto:sbs-irb@uchicago.edu) (general)

Do you want to …

* Take the survey
* Learn more about this study [project info page people go to from here]

***Main Questions***

*The two main questions and answers will be the same across 4 pictures shown to the respondent. A participant’s progress through the survey will be indicated with the following:* Picture 1 out of 4. *One picture and one character trait will be shown at a time. With 7 variables, each question should take about 1 to 2.5 minutes to complete, and the entire section—8 to 20 minutes.*

**Q1. Take a look at the picture. What do you feel about the car? Please go with your first reaction.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | very much | somewhat | neither | somewhat | very much |  |
| deserved | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | undeserved |
| necessary | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | unnecessary |
| expected by social peers | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | seen as braggy by social peers |
| functional | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | showy |
| honestly gotten | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | suspect in origin |
| Classy | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | Garish |
| reflects owner’s social status | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | falsely projects owner’s high social status |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | very much | somewhat | neither | somewhat | very much |  |
| genuine | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | poser |
| reputable | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | disreputable |
| law abiding | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | crooked |
| cultured | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | vulgar |
| fun-loving | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | pretentious |
| ambitious | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | lazy |
| kind | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | 〇 | rude |

**Q2. What can the car tell you about its owner? Going with your honest and first gut feelings, please rate how you feel about the owner:**

***Demographics:***

**D1. What is your gender?**〇 Man 〇 Woman

**D2. What year were you born?**Year: \_\_\_\_\_

**D3. Regardless of your citizenship status, do you identify yourself as American?**

〇 Yes  
〇 No

**D4. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic, Latinx (Latino/Latina) or of Spanish Origin?**

〇 Yes

〇 No

**D5. What is your race? Select all that apply.**

▢ American Indian or Alaska Native

▢ East and Southeast Asian

▢ South Asian

▢ Black or African American

▢ Middle Eastern

▢ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

▢ White

▢ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**D6. What is the highest educational level you have attained?**

* None
* Up to 12th grade, but no high school diploma
* High school diploma or GED
* Some college, but no college degree
* Associate’s degree (two-year college degree, AA or AS)
* Bachelor’s degree (four-year college degree, BA or BS)
* Master’s degree
* Doctorate or professional degree beyond college (PhD, MD, DO, JD, LLD, etc.)

**D7. What is the total income of your household?**

〇 Less than $40,000

〇 $40,000 to $79,999

〇 $80,000 to $119,999

〇 $120,000 to $159,999

〇 $160,000 or more

***Post-Completion Question:***

**I want to better understand people’s reactions to the pictures in this survey.**

**Do I have permission to invite you within the next two weeks for a follow-up conversational interview if your case is selected? Conversational phone interviews last about 15 minutes and participants receive a $20 thank you. Note that saying yes here does not mean you have to do the next interview, only that I have permission to invite you.**  
〇 Yes  
〇 No

IF YES: Please provide contact information. I will only be used this information to be in touch with cases selected for follow-up. All information provided here will be separated from answers to the survey and deleted when the interviews are done.

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ May I text this number? ⃝ Yes ⃝No

Times you are most likely to be available for a 15-minute phone call:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Monday: | morning | noon | evening |
| Tuesday: | morning | noon | evening |
| Wednesday: | morning | noon | evening |
| Thursday: | morning | noon | evening |
| Friday: | morning | noon | evening |
| Saturday: | morning | noon | evening |

***Interview Intro:***

You have been selected for a follow-up interview to the survey you recently completed about feelings evoked by pictures of cars and their owners taken in an urban setting. Your participation is voluntary. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer. You can end your participation at any time. Your identity will remain confidential. You answers will only be reported in an aggregate. Once you complete the interview, you will receive a link to your $20 Amazon gift card. Do you agree to these terms? Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

***Interview Questions:***

*Applicable to respondents selected based on their answers to the survey and contacted. X stands for a specific answer, such as “very much genuine” or “somewhat showy” to one of the two main questions. Question 1 is asked just once. Question 2 is asked multiple times while changing the responses the interviewee is commenting on.*

**1. In your opinion, what are the main reasons people buy expensive cars?**

**2. Take a look at this picture. Could you tell me a bit about why you felt that the owner/car is *X*?**

# Budget and Timeline.

## Calendar. (Let me note again here that this is only a hypothetical project.)

Overall time frame: March 28, 2022, to June 30, 2022. (13 weeks.)  
Field period: April 25, 2022 to May 29, 2022. (5 weeks.)   
Hours per week during Spring Quarter: 5-8. Hours per week during Summer Quarter: 12-24.



## Budget detail.

Total expected project hard costs: $200  
Amazon gift cards: $200 = 1 x $100 + 5 x $20. These serve as incentives.

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