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Beyond Delayed Gratification: Towards a Theory of Mental Conditioning for Sustainable Poverty Reduction

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Abstract - The theory of delayed gratification is widely recognized for its explanatory power in predicting individual and societal success. It posits that the ability to defer immediate desires in favor of greater future rewards is crucial for achieving long-term goals. In the context of poverty reduction, this theory suggests that the ability of individuals living in poverty to delay immediate gratification is crucial for escaping poverty. Those who can delay gratification are more likely to break free from poverty, while those who cannot tend to remain trapped in it. This paper highlights the limitations of the delayed gratification theory in explaining why poverty reduction achieved through this approach often fails to reduce inequality and ensure sustainability. It seeks to move beyond the theory by presenting an alternative theoretical framework that better explains the persistence of poverty and the shortcomings of delayed gratification in addressing inequality and unsustainability. The study draws on three sources of data: (1) a comprehensive literature review, (2) introspective insights and non-judgmental observation of thoughts and emotions by the second and third authors, and (3) a field survey conducted in the Kobeigane GS Division of the Kurunegala District in Sri Lanka, involving interviews with 35 individuals from both wealthy and poor families. Our findings confirm that, as the theory suggests, individuals in poverty who possess the ability to delay gratification are more likely to escape it. However, their success often reinforces the very desires they once delayed. As a result, these reinforced desires, along with the associated aversions, sense of self, and self-centeredness, have diminished their capacity to act in harmony with themselves, others, and nature in ways that promote equality and sustainability. This limitation stems from the theory's underlying materialistic paradigm, which implicitly assumes that desires are fixed and permanent traits of human nature. In contrast, our findings reveal that desires are not fixed and permanent but conditioned mental constructs that can be dissolved by freeing the mind from its conditioning. Based on this insight, the paper proposes an alternative theory of mental conditioning. This theory suggests that sustainable poverty reduction, along with reduced inequality and enhanced sustainability, depends not merely on delaying desires but on transcending them altogether. It argues that the perpetuation of poverty is driven not only by external material conditions but also by internal factors, namely, mental conditioning that constrains individuals' capacity to escape poverty and

foster equality and sustainability. While acknowledging the importance of addressing structural and external factors, the proposed theory emphasizes the transformative potential of freeing the mind from conditioning. A mind thus freed acts naturally and spontaneously for the well-being of the whole self, others, and nature. Such inner transformation, in both wealthy and poor individuals, leads to poverty and inequality reduction that is both effective and sustainable. Drawing on this theoretical framework, the paper outlines practical strategies for integrating mind-liberating practices into poverty reduction programs through local religious centers, educational institutions, and voluntary groups.

Keywords: Beyond Gratification Theory, Mental Conditioning, Poverty Alleviation, Spirituality, Sustainability

Introduction

Poverty reduction has long been at the heart of global development efforts and remains a central focus of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals [1]. While significant progress has been made in reducing poverty in certain parts of the world, persistent inequality, limited improvement in subjective well-being, and ongoing unsustainability continue to pose major challenges. In response to these shortcomings, some scholars emphasize egocentrism, injustice, and unequal power relations in development practice as key contributing factors to failure [2] [3] [4] [5], while others critique modernization approaches for their uncritical transfer of science and technology from wealthy to poorer nations [6] [7]. Advocates of sustainable development, on the other hand, highlight the neglect of environmental sustainability [8] [9] [10]. We argue that the perpetuation of poverty, inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability arises not only from external factors but also from inner factors such as greed, fear, and self-centeredness at the level of individuals, societies, and nations. Conventional development strategies tend to focus exclusively on external factors while neglecting this inner dimension. We believe the root cause lies there, and this is the critical gap that must be addressed.

This study seeks to address these gaps by re-examining poverty reduction through the lens of the well-known psychological theory of delayed gratification. While this theory helps explain why some individuals escape poverty while others remain in it, we argue that it has serious limitations when applied to issues of equality, well-being, and sustainability. These limitations underscore the necessity of fostering inner transformation in order to reduce poverty in a truly sustainable manner. We propose that what is truly required is a deeper inner transformation: a shift from a self-centered orientation, where actions are driven primarily by personal desires, aversions, and self-interest, to a whole-centered orientation, where individuals naturally consider the well-being of others and the greater whole. The challenge with poverty reduction strategies based on delayed gratification is that they often reinforce desire itself, postponing gratification does not free people from desire; it intensifies it. This keeps individuals focused on the self, on acquiring and consuming more, which ultimately undermines both equality and sustainability. In this research, drawing on a literature review, a field survey, and insights from the contemplative practices of two of the authors, we explore an alternative theoretical framework—one that supports both poverty reduction and sustainable human flourishing. The specific objectives of the study are (1) to critically examine the effectiveness of poverty reduction through delayed gratification, (2) to assess the transformative potential of freeing the mind from desires, (3) to develop an alternative theoretical framework of mental conditioning, and (4) to provide policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Sustainability and Poverty

When it comes to sustainability, the Brundtland Report [8] states that in order to achieve sustainability, it requires the fulfilment of the present generation's needs without hindering the future generations' ability to meet their needs. But Ulluwishewa [11] highlights the key weakness of this definition, as it only focuses on the temporal dimensions of sustainability and focuses on providing justice for the future generations and fails to address the likelihood of individuals, communities, or a country as a whole meeting their needs while compromising the ability of another individual, community or a country in meeting their own needs. He further highlights that a society that meets its own needs at the expense of others cannot sustain itself indefinitely. Therefore, this study would follow the definition provided by Ulluwishewa (2018, p. 66 [11]) that states "sustainability is the ability of any individual, community or country to meet their needs and live happily without compromising the ability of other individuals, communities, countries and future generations to meet their needs and live happily".

It is vital to take into account that a powerful and wealthy segment of the population could contemporarily hinder the ability of less powerful and poor individuals' ability to meet their needs. Ulluwishewa [12] argues that elites who lack

a spiritual basis and are dominated by their self-centred mindset would operate in a way that would benefit themselves at the expense of those who should receive these benefits. A mind that is governed by self-centeredness would propose strategies in relation to development that would, for example, provide them access to others' resources easily, work towards maximizing their income while making others permanently dependent on them, and in doing so, it would enhance their power over others. The financial gap between the rich and poor would further widen so long as the conventional development methods continue to be implemented from a self-centred mindset, as they would prioritize the elites while falling short at benefiting others.

As stated by Yew-Kwang Ng and Lok Sang Ho [13] "if success is understood as rising above the crowds, then someone's success necessarily implies another's failure. Such "success" creates momentary happiness but destroys other people's happiness at the same time" (p. 14). This further showcases how contemporary self-centred behavior exacerbates the gap between the poor and the elite. As Ruskin (1860, as cited in Reid, 1995, p.137 [9]) states, "the art of making yourself rich, in the ordinary mercantile economic sense, is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbor poor". Thus, when an individual, government, and countries prioritize their self-interest, it would further result in poverty and inequality.

When it comes to poverty, it is widely recognized as a pressing issue in the world that can have negative implications [14]. Poverty is defined by MacInnes et al. (2013, p.12 [15]) as "lacking the resources to attain the norms of contemporary society". While Azevedo [16] defines poverty as "pronounced deprivation in well-being", in which individuals with inadequate income or consumption that falls short of a certain poverty threshold can be considered poor. In 2025, 808 million people live below the poverty line of \$3.00 per day worldwide [17]. Semasinghe (2015, as cited in Liyanage, 2025 [14]) states that poverty can hamper a country's development and sustainability. When it comes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" is their number one goal among the seventeen goals [18]. When it comes to Sri Lanka, the poverty rate has increased from 13.1% in 2021 to 25% in 2022, with an additional 2.5 million individuals living below the poverty line in 2022 (World Bank, as cited in United Nations Development Programme, 2023 [19]). Therefore, at this point it highlights that poverty alleviation is a vital factor in gaining sustainable development.

The underlying reason behind the failure to alleviate poverty is due to the lack of a spiritual basis for conventional development [12]. As previously stated, the conventional development driven by temporary characteristics such as self-centeredness and greed for power and wealth at the expense of others is a reflection of one's spiritual underdevelopment that overlays our true human nature, which could be dissolved through spiritual development. Spirituality-based development would help to foster selflessness, selfless love, compassion, and generosity. This is vital as elites who can transform their mind and become an 'inner guide' [12] would be able to see the underlying consequences of their actions in relation to overconsumption and how the poor are struggling; this would in turn transform them to undertake non-exploitative economic pursuits that would provide positive implications.

Mind and Mental Conditioning

The literature shows that the mind can be considered in two dimensions: Psyche and Human Spirit (Lonergan as cited in Helminiak, 2023). As Helminiak (2023) described it, Psyche is the part of the brain that we have in common with other mammals and primates; this comprises of the emotions, memories, imagery, and conations or urges. But what makes humans unique is that we can experience and think in relation to our mental processing, unlike animals, where we are conscious, self-present, and in part spiritual. This is where the second dimension of our mind comes into place, as it is the Consciousness, or Spirit, characterized in the form of non-objectified self-presence; it forms the basis of our subjectivity. What makes this part of the mind truly crucial is that by understanding the nature of consciousness, one can transcend space and time, which is known as being spiritual. But the existence of the Psyche alongside the Spirit would have both positive and negative implications. The Psyche can support us, where the Psyche and Spirit could sustain a working equilibrium that maintains a person's mental health. But the psyche is susceptible to distorting our spiritual functioning; for instance, the psyche-based emotions can cloud a person's ability to have positive thought patterns, and the psyche-based habitual dishonesty dulls out a person's sensitivity to truth [20]. To primarily be governed by one's psyche is to abide by the programming that one is shaped into, since Helminiak [20] states that the psyche is focused on maintaining one's comfort and to follow one's routine that is programmed into them through their natural tendencies, childhood experiences, the social environment, and history. It is the part that determines individual differences and arises in varied forms across cultural settings [20]. In contrast, what is crucial is for a person to be primarily governed by their Spirit rather than their Psyche, as the Spirit is open to experiences and to transcend beyond the status quo [20].

The two dimensions of the human mind have been recognized in literature by many authors and named differently. For instance, the Spirit and the Psyche are identified as Higher Force and Lower Force [21] [22], Higher Self and Lower Self [23], Higher Consciousness and Lower Consciousness [24] [25]. Many religious traditions affirm that the Spirit or the Higher Consciousness is inherent in every human being. It is referred to variously in different religions as the “Buddha Within” by Rahula [26], “God Within,” in Bhagavad Gita, or “the Kingdom of God Within” in the Bible (Luke 17:20). These concepts emphasize the notion that at our core lies a pristine state of mind, free from desires, aversions, and the illusion of a separate self. In this state, the individual transcends personal biases and separateness, achieving harmony, compassion, wisdom, creativity, and joy. This understanding of inner potential is not exclusive to religious thought; recent advances in neuroscience support this view.

Cozolino [27], for example, emphasizes that the human brain is a social organ, designed to connect and communicate with others, much like the interaction of neurons. Lieberman [28] reinforces this view, stating that the need to connect socially is more fundamental to human beings than even the need for food and shelter. Furthermore, Pfaff [29] provides neuroscientific evidence that the human brain is hardwired for altruism and the Golden Rule—treating others as one would like to be treated oneself. In his book *The Altruistic Brain*, Pfaff [30] argues that spontaneous kindness and prosocial behavior are innate human tendencies, not learned behaviors. Despite this intrinsic potential, individuals often live guided not by the Spirit, but by the Psyche. If Spirit represents the pristine state of the mind, Psyche represents the conditioned mind. In neuroscience, the process of mental conditioning has been described in terms of neuroplasticity – the brain’s capacity to rewire itself based on experience. Through the mechanism of neuroplasticity, desires, aversions, the sense of self, self-centeredness and ultimately the sense of separateness are “soft-wired” into the brain [31]. Consequently, individuals develop a sense of a distinct self and are driven by desires for pleasurable experiences and aversions to painful ones.

Delayed Gratification theory and Its Limitations

The Theory:

The delay of gratification is the tendency of an individual to give up the need to achieve immediate gratification, while favoring a more valuable long-term outcome, which showcases a vital aspect of self-control throughout the waiting period [32]. The origins of the concept of delay of gratification stem from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, in which he directs children towards the formation of an illusory intention in relation to the child’s goals that require a delay of gratification, which in turn eases the strain from such delay of gratification [32]. Later on in 1968, Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel conducted multiple experiments focusing on delayed gratification [33]. Mischel and Ebbesen’s [34] experiment focused on attention in relation to the delay of gratification, where preschool children had to wait for a favored but delayed reward, with the option of a delayed reward, less-favored immediate reward, both rewards or no rewards. The findings showcase that when the reward is not visible for attention, the subject can easily refrain from being frustrated with blocked rewards and instead get occupied in activities that are done openly or through thought processes. On the other hand, when the reward is visible for attention, it enhances the degree of frustration and decreases the delay of gratification.

Mischel et al. [35] conducted three experiments focused on attentional and cognitive mechanisms in delay of gratification, where preschool children could gain an immediate but lower reward or wait indefinitely to gain a more attractive but delayed reward. Through the experiments, it was identified that attention and cognitive mechanisms that increase the significance of rewards actually shorten the time of voluntary delay; meanwhile, distractions contribute to delays [35]. These experiments, although incorrectly simplified by the media as the marshmallow test, were the “delay of immediate gratification for the sake of delayed but more valued paradigm” (Mischel, 2012, p.4 [36]).

As per Michel (as cited in Yan & Li, 2024 [32]), the ability to delay gratification entails two stages. The first stage comprises the choice of the delay. Where an individual would forgo the present satisfaction, on the expectation of a more valuable long-term outcome; that is influenced by one’s own expectation, which is formed based on their past experiences, exemplary role models, and belief in a reward. The second stage is the maintenance of the delay. In order to do so, one must overcome one’s own state of no gratification to sustain the choice of delay of gratification.

Funder [37] highlights two distinct ways of understanding delay of gratification. The first, supported by Mischel and colleagues (1988, as cited in Funder, 1998 [37]), views it as an ability, a skill arising from cognitive capacity, social competence, and meta-cognitive awareness. In this perspective, the ability to wait for a larger reward reflects the development of self-regulation skills. The second, advanced by Funder and Block [38], interprets delay of gratification as one behavioral expression of a broader personality trait known as *ego control*. Here, individual differences in delaying gratification are seen alongside related tendencies, such as risk-taking versus risk-avoidance or emotional

expression versus emotional restraint. From this view, people may be described as undercontrolled (quick to act on impulses) or overcontrolled (excessively restrained), depending on how strongly they suppress or express emotional and motivational impulses.

Negative Implications of Delayed Gratification

The participants who showcase higher levels of delay weren't necessarily just better at self-control, but they tend to be unable to avoid it; in general, they tend to be smarter and well-adjusted, but also have a tendency to be overcontrolled and unnecessarily inhibited [37]. Polivy (as cited in Funder, 1998 [37]) states the negative consequences of an individual being excessively self-controlling due to the self-control behavior in itself. The ego control view indicates the probability that sometimes individuals who are susceptible to excessive self-control would already have imperfect psychological adjustments and could suffer from the propensity towards negative effects, health issues and cognitive disruptions [37]. Thus, Polivy (as cited in Funder, 1998 [37]) states that impulse control can lead to negative consequences.

Funder and Block [38] showcase that the behavioral result of a person with a typical undercontrolled behavioral pattern would have a higher tendency to take any reward that is immediately available, regardless of the opportunity cost of long-term benefits. But a person with a typical overcontrolled behavior pattern has an increased likelihood to delay or even forgo pleasure and rewards despite having the chance to enjoy them without incurring any cost. Therefore, Funder and Block [38] state that "delayed gratification is not always useful or appropriate" (p.1041) as the consequences of overcontrol are not always beneficial and can be costly for the individual.

Delayed Gratification Theory and Poverty

Griskevicius et al. [39] state that when an individual grows up being poor, the mortality cues encourage them to value the present moment and gamble to gain contemporary rewards; while an individual brought up in wealth values the future and refrains from risky gambles due to the mortality cues. Adamkovic [40] states that the reluctance to delay gratification can be identified in relation to financial decision-making. For instance, a study done by Brown et al. [41] showcases that respondents were given two options. Option one provides immediate yet partial payments, while option two provides a deferred payment structure, comprising an interest rate return of more than 26%. Respondents with higher income and financial liquidity tend to take the deferred payment option, due to bequest motives and long-term life expectancy. While individuals with liquidity constraints needed money regardless of their views on bequest motives, political risk and higher inflation.

As per Baumeister et al. (1994, as cited in Adamkovic, 2019 [40]), the resource model of self-control has been prevalently used to explain the reduced delay of gratification in relation to poverty. Based on the model, an individual's mental capacity tends to be finite, risking the possibility of exhaustion from trying to regulate one's own behavior [40]. In accordance with the limited-resource model, people tend to gradually worsen at self-control the higher they resist unwanted desires [42]. Adopting self-control earlier in the day, the greater the probability of impulsive behavior at the latter part of the day; this situation corresponds to poverty, as individuals in poverty have to frequently battle back desires [42]. By refraining from satisfying urges and controlling one's behavior, it inadvertently depletes self-control resources; this often predominantly impacts poor people due to the availability of finite resources, the resource limitations require trade-offs and frequent decision making [42]. An individual facing financial constraints and having to resist spending money on a frequent basis on basic utilities feels sadness, guilt, or shame, making them distressed; this would cause an exhausting mental burden that would eventually drive them towards taking economically unfavorable choices [40].

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative-dominant approach within an interpretivist framework, focusing on understanding people's lived experiences, meanings, and perspectives rather than relying solely on numerical measures to predict or explain behavior. The study is based on data derived from three sources: (1) a review of literature on the science of spirituality, and economics, sociology, and psychology of poverty and inequality; (2) insights gained by the second and third authors introspective journey of over two decades through non-judgmental observation of thoughts, speech and actions; and (3) preliminary findings from a survey which involved interviewing 35 individuals in Kobeigane GS division in Kurunegala District. In conducting the interviews, no predetermined numerical sample size was set. Instead, the process began by interviewing both wealthy and poor households identified by key informants who were well acquainted with the community. They initially identified families as poor or wealthy based on the community's general perception of their socio-economic status. These classifications were subsequently verified during household visits through visual observations of housing conditions, clothing, household goods, and facilities, as well as through

information provided by respondents regarding income sources, property ownership, and overall living standards. After interviewing 20 wealthy households, of which 15 were born poor but had escaped poverty (EP), and 5 were born wealthy, and 15 poor households (RP), it became evident that the point of saturation had been reached, no new themes or patterns of mental conditioning were emerging. At this stage, the dominance of mental conditioning over the theory of delayed gratification in explaining the perpetuation of poverty and inequality in the community was clearly established. Consequently, it was determined that additional interviews were unlikely to generate further insights, and data collection was concluded. Based on the collected data, four categories of households were identified and thematic analysis was employed to uncover recurring patterns within these categories that reflected participants' mental conditioning and its implications for delayed gratification. Statements from the interviewees were used to substantiate the findings. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned codes, which are used throughout the text.

The data were informed by insights gained by the second and third authors through their contemplative practices, including introspection, retrospection, and non-judgmental observation of thoughts and emotions. These practices helped the researchers identify key areas and themes to focus on during the field survey, which involved interviews with both wealthy and poor individuals. This approach was grounded in the philosophical premise that all human beings, regardless of socio-economic status share the same fundamental psychological structures. Both wealthy and poor individuals experience similar internal dynamics of desire, aversion, fear, and the instinct for self-preservation. The two authors, as human beings, are not separate from the conditions they sought to study. Thus, observing the inner workings of their own minds provided a valid and meaningful way to gain insights into the minds of others. This methodological stance is supported by phenomenological philosophy [43], heuristic inquiry [44], and first-person methodologies in cognitive science [45], all of which affirm that deep reflection on personal experience can reveal universal structures of the human mind. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of this method. To reduce potential biases, these insights were validated through triangulation by drawing first on scientific evidence from psychology and neuroscience literature, and second on findings from the field survey.

Through careful, non-judgmental observation of their own thoughts and emotions, the two authors identified a set of psychological dynamics relevant to both the rich and the poor. They observed that the human mind is strongly conditioned by desires, aversions, and a constructed sense of self marked by self-centeredness. These tendencies create a mutually reinforcing cycle: the stronger the desire for something, the stronger the aversion to its opposite. Such inner tensions often generate conflict and disturb inner peace. However, when thoughts arising from desires, aversions, and self-centeredness were observed without judgment and allowed to naturally subside, a sense of peace and contentment emerged. This process appeared to bring about a psychological shift from self-centeredness to whole-centeredness. These observations suggest that beneath the conditioned, self-centered mind, common to both the wealthy and the poor, there exists a potential for whole-centeredness, which can make thoughts and behaviors more conducive to equality, subjective well-being, and sustainability. The insights further indicate that, alongside external changes, freeing the minds of both rich and poor from such conditioning could play an important role in reducing poverty, inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability.

Multiple techniques were employed to mitigate potential biases arising from both interviewers (researchers) and interviewees. To reduce the influence of researchers' preconceptions, reflexivity and bracketing were practiced throughout the data collection process. Interviews were conducted by multiple researchers, including a senior academic with extensive interviewing experience, to further mitigate interviewer bias. In addition, triangulation was applied across multiple data sources, such as theoretical frameworks, informal discussions with key informants, on-site observations, and the researchers' own insights gained through non-judgmental observation of their thoughts and emotions related to their mental conditioning.

Results and Discussion

Poverty Reduction by Delayed Gratification: The preliminary results of the survey identified four categories among the interviewees: (1) born poor and continue in poverty, (2) born poor but escaped poverty, (3) born rich and continue to be rich (4) born rich but failed to sustain wealth. In this section, characteristics of each category are viewed through the lens of the theory of delayed gratification in order to assess the effectiveness of delayed gratification to explain poverty reduction and its limitations, and then how the proposed theory of mental conditioning could overcome these limitations and explain poverty reduction more comprehensively. We identified mental conditioning in two levels that we call 'primary conditioning' and 'secondary conditioning'. Primary conditioning is universal, resulting from how individuals perceive themselves and the world through sensory input that results in desires, aversions, and the sense of separate self. On the other hand, secondary conditioning refers to culture-specific and class-specific programming. From early childhood, individuals absorb beliefs, values, behavioral norms, attitudes, ideologies, theories, and habits

from their social environments. These become soft-wired in the brain and act as filters through which individuals interpret reality.

Born Poor but Escaped Poverty.

Primary conditioning in these success stories is defined by a strong desire to escape inherited poverty and embrace a better future. This involves not only rejecting the identity of being poor but also cultivating emotional discipline to delay gratification, tolerate struggle, and maintain ambition. For instance, EP1 emphasizes this internal strength: "*You have to have a great desire to get rich... You become poor because of your own will.*" His statement reflects a deeply rooted belief in personal responsibility and self-determination, which is aligned with delayed gratification theory-choosing to endure hardship now in order to secure greater rewards later.

Similarly, EP2 shows this strength through his choices: "*If those guys earn 100 rupees a day, they spend 90. But I am not like that. I spend 10 rupees and save 90 rupees.*" This disciplined rejection of short-term pleasure (spending like peers) in favor of long-term financial security is a textbook application of delayed gratification theory. It demonstrates how saving and sacrifices today build future capacity for growth.

Another element of their primary conditioning is the refusal to accept victimhood. EP3 explains: "*It is useless to just sit around and drink. I need to develop.*" Here, delayed gratification is expressed as rejecting the immediate comfort of alcohol and idleness in favor of the long-term reward of self-development. Likewise, EP4 declares: "*The only way to eliminate poverty is to work hard and hard.*" His words reflect a willingness to persistently delay rest, leisure, and quick fixes in pursuit of enduring progress. EP9 said this: "*My business is in a good position today because I worked hard without worrying about small setbacks and thinking about the future.*" Again, this shows how the practice of delaying gratification-accepting short-term discomfort and setbacks-directly fuels long-term success.

Secondary conditioning also plays a critical role in their transformation. These individuals were exposed to empowering role models, mentors, education, or spiritual values that nurtured belief in their ability to succeed. For example, EP10 credits planning and spirituality: "*I am a very organized planner... As a Buddhist, I have built a very good relationship with the temple.*" Here, delayed gratification theory is seen in structured planning (foregoing impulsive decisions) and moral grounding (living with discipline), both of which guide him toward future stability rather than short-term distractions.

Others, like EP3 and EP2, found motivation in being mistreated by society: "*People treated us badly. Because we were poor. That is why I was very interested in developing myself.*" This emotional pain could have led to immediate resignation, but instead, they transformed it into motivation to delay gratification: rather than seeking quick relief (anger, escape, self-pity), they channeled the energy into sustained hard work for a future where dignity replaces shame.

However, after achieving success, some develop new secondary conditioning that sustains inequality. For instance, EP1 and EP3 argue: "*They need to learn to do their jobs properly*" or "*A person becomes poor by waiting for other people's things.*" This reflects the mindset of delayed gratification taken to an extreme-valuing hard work and sacrifice so much that they dismiss the struggles of those still trapped in poverty. While this attitude validates their own journey, it also creates distance from the poor and reduces empathy, showing how delayed gratification can shape not only pathways out of poverty but also new social divisions.

In summary, those who escape poverty undergo a profound internal transformation. Their success is fueled by an empowered self-image and the disciplined practice of delayed gratification-saving instead of spending, working instead of resting, enduring setbacks instead of giving up. These behaviors are reinforced by supportive external influences. Yet, after success, their strong belief in delayed gratification can sometimes harden into judgment of those still poor, reproducing inequality even as they themselves rise above it.

Born Poor and Remain in Poverty.

A recurring expression of primary conditioning among those born poor and who continue in poverty is the persistent prioritization of short-term comfort over long-term stability. For instance, RP1 openly admits, "*I earn 2500 rupees a day. I spend about 500 rupees on drinks arrack in the evening.*" Likewise, RP2 confesses, "*Whatever I earn, I don't save it for life. I just pass the time.*" These behaviors may seem careless, but they reflect a conditioned tendency to seek immediate relief from hardship rather than endure discomfort for future benefit. According to delayed gratification theory, resisting small daily pleasures (like alcohol or spending) in order to save or invest leads to long-term improvement. Here, the inability to delay gratification locks individuals into repeating poverty day after day.

This pattern is reinforced by a pervasive sense of helplessness. RP1, for example, explains, “*No, I don't think about doing business. I do mason work or do manual labor,*” and admits that he often avoids work when bored. Such statements reveal not laziness, but a conditioned belief that consistent effort will not meaningfully improve life. Similarly, RP6 laments, “*I can't imagine how people who do business and prosper do that... we don't have money to spend.*” The inability to even imagine success highlights how primary conditioning limits aspiration itself, creating an invisible psychological boundary that keeps individuals in poverty. Delayed gratification theory shows that consistent sacrifice and effort only make sense when people believe the future will be better. Since these individuals see no future reward for effort, they default to immediate rest or avoidance, reinforcing short-term living.

This helplessness is often passed down through generations, embedding poverty as part of family identity. RP4 recalls, “*Since I was little, we didn't have money. We have land plots. Even so, we don't work hard.*” RP3 similarly reflects, “*Our parents used to make betel leaves. But we didn't even learn that.*” These admissions show how survival habits, low initiative, and avoidance of discomfort become normalized across generations. Poverty is thus not only material but also a psychological inheritance. From a delayed gratification perspective, the unwillingness to invest effort in land or skills today reflects the loss of intergenerational discipline. Instead of teaching children to sacrifice now for future gain, families internalize avoidance, ensuring poverty continues across generations.

Another outcome of primary conditioning is the development of a victim identity. Many respondents view their struggles as unavoidable and predetermined. RP9 says, “*We have not even bought a house yet... It is very difficult to build a house by working on rent.*” RP4 adds, “*We are suffering like this today because we have not received anything from our generation,*” while RP6 reflects, “*Because we are very poor, there is no one to care for us.*” Such statements illustrate how poverty becomes internalized as fate rather than something that can be changed through sacrifice and delayed gratification. The theory here explains that delaying gratification requires hope and agency that present sacrifices will produce a better tomorrow. When life is seen as predetermined fate, the very foundation of delayed gratification collapses, leaving people resigned to short-term.

Alongside primary conditioning, secondary conditioning provides external reinforcement through culture, politics, and social interaction. One common example is dependency on aid. RP3 complains, “*We don't get the Samurdhi subsidy. We applied two or three times, but we didn't get it.*” Another laments, “*We don't even get any relief. We are very helpless.*” The expectation of external support creates passivity: when help does not arrive, individuals feel powerless instead of motivated to act independently. In delayed gratification terms, waiting for aid is the opposite of self-disciplined sacrifice, it shifts focus from “what can I save or endure now for tomorrow” to “what will others give me now,” which undermines personal responsibility for future-oriented behavior.

Moreover, political and social narratives often strengthen a sense of blame and separation. RP6 observes, “*The rich people in the village always want to show the poor people their condition,*” while RP1 notes, “*There is no much friendship with the rich people in the village. They have big houses, big gates, and big vehicles and do not associate with us.*” Such perceptions may reflect real inequality, yet they also entrench resentment and deepen the belief that upward mobility is impossible. This outlook erodes the willingness to endure short-term sacrifices for long-term goals. Delayed gratification requires a belief that the sacrifices of today can eventually bring one closer to the success of others. But when the rich are seen as unreachable, sacrifice feels pointless, and individuals choose short-term comfort instead.

As RP4 explains, “*Anyway, if we had two meals a day, we would have been able to live,*” while RP6 recalls, “*We always knew how to fill our stomachs with a little bit of whatever we ate.*” When meeting basic needs becomes the only measure of life, delayed gratification loses relevance, and ambition fades. Childhood experiences reinforce this cycle: “*I went to school only for the fifth grade. Then I went to the orphanage... I worked in a house in Rajagiriya for a very small salary, but I did a lot of work,*” says RP4. With limited education and no exposure to alternative role models, poverty is accepted as a permanent condition. In terms of delayed gratification theory, this survivalist orientation sets such a low standard of life that sacrificing higher goals is never imagined. Without role models to demonstrate the benefits of long-term effort, children grow up prioritizing immediate relief over future achievement.

In this way, primary conditioning (aversion to discomfort, helplessness, victim identity) and secondary conditioning (dependency on aid, blame-focused worldviews, survivalist culture) combine to create a psychological loop where short-term relief continually overrides long-term planning. Delayed gratification theory makes clear that the ability to resist present comfort in favor of long-term security is a critical pathway out of poverty. For those born poor and unable to escape, the failure to delay gratification-reinforced by both internal and external conditioning-becomes one of the strongest barriers to poverty reduction.

Born Wealthy but Failed to Sustain Wealth.

Primary conditioning in this category is often rooted in indulgence and entitlement rather than discipline. Since they were born into abundance, these individuals tend to view wealth as a guarantee rather than a resource requiring stewardship. Instead of cultivating patience, restraint, and future orientation—the hallmarks of delayed gratification—they were conditioned to expect instant satisfaction. This weakens their ability to tolerate discomfort or delay pleasure, which gradually undermines financial security.

For example, individuals who prioritize luxury consumption over investment illustrate a direct rejection of delayed gratification. By choosing to spend on status symbols, expensive lifestyles, or fleeting pleasures, they sacrifice long-term stability for short-term satisfaction. This reflects what the theory warns against: the inability to resist immediate rewards ultimately diminishes future well-being.

Secondary conditioning further reinforces this decline. Surrounded by peers or social environments that glorify materialism, appearances, and comfort, these individuals receive external validation for consumption rather than restraint. For instance, if one spends excessively on parties or maintaining social prestige, it signals how external influences cultivate impulsive behaviors. In terms of the delayed gratification theory, this conditioning undermines the practice of patience and replaces it with habits of instant pleasure-seeking.

Statements such as *“I earned money, so I must enjoy it now”* (common among those who failed to sustain wealth) encapsulate the mindset of low delayed gratification. Here, the preference is for immediate enjoyment of wealth rather than saving, investing, or reinvesting for the future. The inability to resist present temptations—whether alcohol, entertainment, gambling, or reckless spending—illustrates how weak self-control and the absence of supportive external structures accelerate financial decline.

In contrast to disciplined, wealthy individuals who embrace education and planning, those who fail to sustain wealth often neglect long-term development. For example, they may avoid higher education, skill-building, or reinvestment in business, believing their inherited wealth is sufficient. Delayed gratification theory directly explains this failure: without a willingness to sacrifice short-term ease for long-term growth, their wealth base gradually erodes.

In summary, individuals born wealthy but unable to sustain their wealth exemplify the dangers of weak delayed gratification. Their primary conditioning (comfort, indulgence, entitlement) and secondary conditioning (peer influence, social materialism, lack of discipline) produce short-term choices that erode wealth. By prioritizing pleasure and appearances over planning and patience, they undermine their ability to sustain prosperity, proving how the absence of delayed gratification leads to financial and social decline.

Born Wealthy and Remain Wealthy: Conditioning and Delayed Gratification.

Primary conditioning for those born wealthy and who remain wealthy is defined by early exposure to structured environments where discipline, patience, and long-term planning are emphasized. Unlike the poor, who must fight against deprivation, the wealthy inherit both resources and frameworks that encourage them to protect and multiply their advantages. Crucially, many of these frameworks align directly with delayed gratification theory: the willingness to sacrifice immediate pleasures or impulsive consumption in order to preserve and expand wealth for the future.

For example, SW1 highlights: *“Positivity, management, and education are all things that are necessary to become a developed person.”* This reflects the delayed gratification mindset in two ways: first, prioritizing education (a long-term investment) over instant comfort, and second, adopting structured management practices that favor stability and sustainability over short-lived gains. His emphasis on self-development indicates a conscious choice to delay present indulgence in order to ensure enduring personal and financial growth.

Similarly, SW4 explains: *“I work for long-term happiness rather than short-term happiness.”* This is a direct expression of delayed gratification theory. Instead of pursuing the immediate satisfactions wealth could easily buy, SW4 deliberately cultivates patience and future orientation. By postponing short-term enjoyment, he safeguards his resources and invests in ventures or practices that promise sustained happiness and intergenerational security.

Secondary conditioning further consolidates these traits. Wealthy families often instill discipline, structured routines, and value-based education in children, reinforcing the practice of delayed gratification from an early age. For instance, structured family discipline may discourage impulsive spending, while cultural or religious education promotes patience, moral responsibility, and duty toward family legacy. These external reinforcements nurture the capacity to resist wasteful pleasures and instead channel resources into business expansion, education, philanthropy, or property—each a long-term investment consistent with delayed gratification.

Additionally, social reinforcement plays a significant role. Wealthy individuals are often embedded in networks where status is maintained not merely by consumption but by achievements, reputation, and legacy-building. This social pressure reinforces the habit of delaying gratification: rather than spending wealth recklessly for immediate enjoyment, they are motivated to reinvest and preserve their status through sustainable practices, which ensures the continuity of wealth across generations.

In summary, those born wealthy and who remain wealthy embody delayed gratification through disciplined choices, long-term investments, and sustained self-development. Their primary conditioning emphasizes responsibility over indulgence, while their secondary conditioning-family structures, education, and social networks-consolidates this mindset. Together, these forces enable not only the preservation but also the expansion of wealth, proving how deeply the principle of delaying gratification is embedded in their pathways of sustained prosperity. In all, Delayed Gratification Theory powerfully affirms the patterns observed through primary and secondary conditioning. The ability-or inability-to delay immediate gratification is not merely a personality trait but a conditioned mental habit shaped by emotional experiences, cultural influences, and social environments. As such, fostering delayed gratification could be a key strategy in breaking cycles of poverty and ensuring sustainable development across socioeconomic classes. This research reveals that poverty and wealth are not only economic conditions but deeply rooted psychological and social realities shaped by primary and secondary conditioning. Individuals who remain poor often exhibit internalized helplessness, short-term thinking, and dependency-symptoms of negative primary and secondary conditioning that reinforce immediate gratification and avoid long-term effort. In contrast, those who escape poverty display a strong internal drive, emotional discipline, and exposure to empowering beliefs that promote self-agency and delayed gratification. Similarly, sustained wealth among the rich is supported by disciplined upbringings and future-oriented value systems, while its loss is linked to overindulgence, weak self-regulation, and status-driven secondary influences. The delayed gratification theory confirms that success is closely tied to one's ability to sacrifice present comfort for future growth, an ability nurtured or hindered by conditioning patterns. Real-life field quotations validate these psychological frameworks, providing grounded evidence for how mindset, upbringing, and environment interact to shape life outcomes. Thus, addressing poverty and inequality requires more than financial aid; it calls for reshaping mental frameworks and social narratives through education, mentorship, and values that cultivate resilience, responsibility, and long-term vision across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on Delayed Gratification and Life Trajectories

Category	Primary Conditioning	Secondary Conditioning	Illustrative Quotes
Born Poor but Escaped Poverty (EP)	Strong desire to escape poverty, rejection of poor identity, discipline, willingness to endure hardship (e.g., EP1, EP2, EP3, EP4, EP5).	Exposure to role models, education, spirituality, and social exclusion motivating perseverance (e.g., EP6, EP2, EP3).	EP2: 'I spend 10 rupees and save 90 rupees.' EP3: 'It is useless to just sit around and drink. I need to develop.'
Born Poor and Remain in Poverty (RP)	Prioritization of short-term comfort, helplessness, victim identity, lack of aspiration (e.g., RP1, RP2, RP3, RP4, RP5, RP6).	Dependency on aid, lack of supportive networks, resentment of inequality, survivalist culture (e.g., RP5, RP3).	RP1: 'I spend about 500 rupees on drinks arrack in the evening.' RP3: 'We don't have money to spend.'
Born Wealthy but Failed to Sustain Wealth (LW)	Indulgence, entitlement, expectation of instant satisfaction, neglect of planning (LW group).	Peer influence promoting materialism, validation through consumption, neglect of education/skills (LW group).	LW: 'I earned money, so I must enjoy it now.'
Born Wealthy and Remain Wealthy (SW)	Discipline, patience, responsibility, orientation toward long-term planning and self-development (e.g., SW1, SW2).	Structured family routines, cultural and educational values, networks reinforcing legacy and sustainability (e.g., SW1, SW2).	SW2: 'I work for long-term happiness rather than short-term happiness.'

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Delayed gratification and Sustainability.

Is the Behavior of the born poor but escaped poverty not sustainable?

While delayed gratification is effective in improving the material conditions of individuals, the psychological foundation from which it emerges is often self-centered rather than whole-centered. Respondents who escaped poverty (EP group) demonstrated strong self-discipline, saving habits, and a refusal of immediate pleasures, which undeniably enabled upward mobility. For example, EP2 said: *"I spend 10 rupees and save 90 rupees"*, and EP5 explained: *"My business is in a good position today because I worked hard without worrying about small setbacks and thinking about the future."* These illustrate the efficacy of delayed gratification in building economic security. However, their intention for practicing discipline largely arose from a sense of separateness and a drive to uplift themselves from poverty. EP1 reflected: "You become poor because of your own will", while EP3 added: "People treated us badly because we were poor. That is why I was very interested in developing myself." These statements reveal that delayed gratification was not rooted in a spirit of oneness or collective upliftment, but rather in self-focused striving to escape stigma and hardship. The motivation was defensive and comparative—separating themselves from "the poor" as a category they no longer wished to belong to.

This self-centered orientation becomes even clearer after success. Several respondents displayed judgmental attitudes toward those who remained poor. For instance, EP1 and EP3 insisted: "They need to learn to do their jobs properly" and "A person becomes poor by waiting for other people's things." These views suggest that once individuals rise above poverty through delayed gratification, they may lose empathy for those still trapped in it. Rather than fostering solidarity or collective well-being, their new mindset perpetuates social distance and inequality. From this perspective, delayed gratification, though materially effective, risks reinforcing the ego, desires, aversions, and self-image it seeks to transcend. Instead of cultivating wholeness, it strengthens the self/other divide: "I succeeded because I worked hard, they remain poor because they are lazy." Such thinking not only legitimizes inequality but also undermines compassion. Moreover, the same conditioning that supports delayed gratification also perpetuates unsustainability. For example, the pursuit of wealth and social recognition often motivates disciplined saving and investment, but these actions are driven by desires for status and upward mobility rather than balanced, whole-centered living. In the long run, this contributes to greater competition, material accumulation, and environmental strain, which are sources of unhappiness and unsustainability.

In summary, the evidence from the "Born Poor but Escaped Poverty" category shows that while delayed gratification enables individuals to overcome poverty materially, it does so by strengthening self-centered motives. This leads to reduced empathy, reinforced inequality, and an orientation toward endless striving, thereby perpetuating unhappiness.

Is the Behavior of the born wealthy and remaining wealthy sustainable?

While delayed gratification is indeed effective in sustaining and expanding the wealth of those born into prosperity, the evidence suggests that its underlying intention is often grounded in separateness and self-centeredness, rather than whole-centeredness. Respondents from the SW group emphasized discipline, planning, and a preference for long-term happiness over short-term indulgence. For example, SW1 stated: "Positivity, management, and education are all things that are necessary to become a developed person," while SW2 explained: "I work for long-term happiness rather than short-term happiness." These statements demonstrate how delayed gratification, through planning, patience, and restraint, enables wealthy individuals to preserve and even enhance inherited resources. Their orientation toward future security and intergenerational continuity reflects the practical success of this mindset in sustaining prosperity. However, a closer analysis of their intentions reveals that these practices are primarily designed to protect and advance their own wealth and family legacy. While the language of "development" and "long-term happiness" sounds future-oriented, it is centered on safeguarding individual and familial advantage. It does not arise from a sense of oneness with society at large, but from an implicit boundary between self (or family) and others. In other words, their discipline and restraint are deployed not for collective well-being, but for the preservation and growth of private prosperity.

This underlying self-centeredness is consistent with the broader dynamics of inequality. By sustaining and multiplying wealth through delayed gratification, the wealthy not only preserve their advantages but also reinforce social divisions between rich and poor. Their disciplined practices, while effective, thus become a mechanism for entrenching inequality. For instance, while poor respondents lamented their inability to save or invest (RP group), the wealthy respondents were able to reinvest precisely because of the material head start they already possessed. The discipline of delayed gratification, in this context, widens rather than narrows the gap between social groups. Furthermore, the wealthy people's reliance on delayed gratification as a tool of wealth preservation risks reinforcing the ego, desires, and aversions. The constant orientation toward protecting status, reputation, and legacy nurtures subtle forms of

desire—desire for control, desire for recognition, desire for continuity of wealth. It also fosters aversion toward risk, loss, or perceived decline. In this way, delayed gratification may not free the wealthy from desire but instead refines and strengthens it, perpetuating the very conditioning of self-centeredness that sustains inequality.

From a broader perspective, this orientation also contributes to unhappiness and unsustainability. Although wealthy individuals may enjoy long-term security, their pursuit of delayed gratification often sustains endless striving for “more” and “better,” never fully dissolving the restlessness of desire. At a structural level, reinvestment practices driven by self-centered motives can also reinforce unsustainable consumption and resource use, since accumulation is pursued primarily for private advantage rather than collective balance. In summary, the Born Wealthy and Remain Wealthy category demonstrates how delayed gratification, while materially effective in sustaining inherited wealth, emerges from self-centered rather than whole-centered intentions. This leads to the strengthening of desires, aversions, and ego-based separateness, which in turn reproduces inequality, fosters subtle unhappiness, and fuels unsustainability.

Beyond Delayed Gratification: Transcending Desires and Cultivating Whole-Centeredness

The analysis of both the Born Poor but Escaped Poverty (EP group) and the Born Wealthy and Remain Wealthy (SW group) highlights the undeniable effectiveness of delayed gratification in improving material conditions. Among the poor, self-discipline, saving, and hard work enabled individuals to rise above deprivation. Among the wealthy, restraint, patience, and long-term planning preserved and expanded inherited resources. In both cases, delayed gratification functioned as a powerful psychological tool for upward mobility and stability.

However, when viewed more critically, a common pattern emerges: the intention underlying delayed gratification in both groups is shaped by separateness and self-centeredness rather than oneness and whole-centeredness.

- For the poor who escaped poverty, delayed gratification was often motivated by a desire to escape stigma, overcome exclusion, and prove oneself. As EP3 explained, “People treated us badly because we were poor. That is why I was very interested in developing myself.” Their discipline and sacrifice were effective, but primarily directed toward personal upliftment and distancing themselves from “the poor.” This tendency later manifested in judgmental attitudes toward those still in poverty, as when EP1 insisted: “You become poor because of your own will.”
- For the wealthy who sustained wealth, delayed gratification was motivated by the need to preserve and expand their family legacy, protect status, and ensure intergenerational continuity. As SW2 expressed: “I work for long-term happiness rather than short-term happiness.” While framed as future-oriented discipline, such motivation primarily safeguarded personal or familial advantage.

In both cases, delayed gratification, while materially effective, strengthened the ego, reinforced desires and aversions, and deepened the boundary between self and others. For the poor, this manifested in reduced empathy toward those left behind. For the wealthy, it manifested in practices that entrenched inequality and widened social divides. In both contexts, delayed gratification nurtured self-centered striving and separateness, which perpetuate inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability. This synthesis reveals that delayed gratification is a double-edged phenomenon. It empowers individuals to achieve personal success but simultaneously reinforces the very psychological and social structures that underlie inequality. By promoting self-centered advancement without dissolving the ego or cultivating oneness, it contributes to cycles of desire, striving, and social division. The findings, therefore, suggest the need to move beyond delayed gratification as the ultimate theoretical framework for poverty reduction and wealth management. A more transformative paradigm lies in the transcendence of desires and the cultivation of whole-centeredness, where action flows not from separateness and self-centered striving but from oneness and alignment with the well-being of the whole.

While the delayed gratification theory explains how individuals escape poverty or sustain wealth by postponing immediate rewards in favor of long-term gains, our findings highlight its limitations. As shown in the previous section, delayed gratification often emerges from a sense of separateness and self-centered striving. Although materially effective, it strengthens ego, competitive comparison, and social division, thereby reproducing inequality and unsustainable patterns of living. An alternative pathway lies not in postponing desires, but in transcending desires altogether. Instead of suppressing impulses for the sake of future rewards, transcending desires involves cultivating an inner state where the grip of desires, aversions, and ego-based striving is dissolved. This shift nurtures whole-centeredness, a perspective where individuals act not merely for personal advancement but in alignment with the well-being of the whole, including others and the environment.

Evidence from our study suggests the possibility of such a transformation. Respondents who escaped poverty through delayed gratification often displayed discipline, resilience, and planning skills. However, these capacities could equally serve a broader, whole-centered orientation if grounded in values of oneness rather than separateness. For instance, the same persistence and foresight that EP5 applied to building his business could, if directed by whole-centeredness, foster cooperative ventures that uplift communities, rather than merely advancing personal gain. The distinction between postponing desires and transcending desires is critical. Postponement keeps the desire alive, merely delaying its fulfillment. This sustains attachment to self-image, ambition, and social comparison. By contrast, transcendence quiets the restless striving of the ego, allowing action to flow from a deeper sense of unity and shared purpose. In such a state, sacrifice is no longer experienced as deprivation for a future reward, but as natural alignment with collective flourishing.

From this perspective, realistic poverty reduction and sustainable prosperity require moving beyond the framework of delayed gratification. Instead of teaching the poor to “wait now for more later,” or praising the wealthy for their discipline in preserving resources, development efforts could focus on freeing the mind from conditioning, enabling individuals to experience oneness and act from whole-centered awareness. Such a shift would not only address material deprivation but also dissolve the inner roots of inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability. In summary, while delayed gratification provides a useful explanation of individual mobility, a more transformative paradigm lies in transcending desires and cultivating whole-centeredness. This approach opens the possibility of sustainable development rooted not in self-centered striving but in shared wellbeing, harmony, and balance between self, others, and the environment.

Towards an Alternative Theory of Mental Conditioning

Transcending Desires towards Whole-Centeredness

The analysis of delayed gratification across socioeconomic groups shows that while it can be materially effective, it is inherently limited by its grounding in separateness and self-centeredness. Both the poor who escape poverty and the wealthy who sustain prosperity achieve success by postponing immediate gratification in favor of long-term rewards. Yet, the intention behind their discipline primarily emerges from ego-driven striving: the poor seeking to rise above stigma and deprivation, and the wealthy seeking to preserve and expand status and legacy. In both cases, delayed gratification strengthens desires, aversions, and self-centeredness, reinforcing inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability. To address these limitations, we propose an alternative theoretical framework that aims to liberate both the poor and the wealthy from conditioned patterns of thought, thereby enabling the transcendence of desire and the cultivation of wholeness.

Delayed gratification postpones desires but does not dissolve them. The desire remains active, waiting for fulfillment at a later stage. This postponement sustains the restless striving of the sense of self and keeps individuals oriented toward “more” and “better” in the future. By contrast, transcending desires involves freeing the mind from the conditioning of desire and aversion altogether. When desires are transcended, action is no longer driven by self-centered striving but flows naturally from inner clarity and alignment with the whole. This is a state of mind that we call “whole-centeredness”. The whole-centeredness emerges when the dichotomy of self-versus other dissolves, and individuals act with equal sensitivity to their own needs and the needs of others. Unlike self-centeredness, which prioritizes personal gain, or other-centeredness, which risks self-neglect, whole-centeredness integrates both. It nurtures harmony within the self, among people, and with the environment. Field evidence illustrates how the discipline and planning skills demonstrated by respondents who practiced delayed gratification could, if rooted in whole-centeredness, serve more inclusive ends. For instance, the persistence that EP5 applied to advancing his business could, in a whole-centered orientation, foster cooperative enterprises that uplift communities, not just individual prosperity. Similarly, the long-term planning of SW2 could prioritize intergenerational ecological stewardship, not merely the continuation of family wealth.

The outcomes of transcending desires and cultivating whole-centeredness differ fundamentally from those of delayed gratification:

- Inequality: Whereas delayed gratification entrenches social divisions by reinforcing self/other boundaries, whole-centeredness dissolves separateness and fosters empathy, thereby reducing inequality.
- Happiness: Whereas delayed gratification sustains restless striving and dissatisfaction, transcendence of desires cultivates inner peace, joy, and contentment.
- Sustainability: Whereas delayed gratification often channels discipline into material accumulation, whole-centeredness directs discipline toward balance, stewardship, and long-term harmony with the environment.

This alternative framework suggests that effective poverty reduction and sustainable prosperity cannot rely solely on teaching delayed gratification. While useful for personal advancement, delayed gratification remains bound to ego and separateness, which undermine social harmony. A transformative approach requires practices and educational strategies that free the mind from conditioning, foster transcendence of desires, and cultivate whole-centeredness. Such an approach would inspire from within to act not merely out of ambition for personal upliftment, but from a deeper awareness of oneness with others and the environment. It shifts the focus from “how can I rise above poverty or sustain my wealth?” to “how can we, together, create conditions of flourishing for all?”

Conditioned Mind vs. Unconditioned Mind

An analogy of flowing rainwater on the ground can be used to illustrate the contrast between these two states of mind. In the conditioned state, the mind is like rainwater trapped in narrow gullies. It flows only along fixed, restrictive paths, representing the way thought and behavior are constrained by self-centered conditioning. Desires and aversions dominate, leading individuals to act primarily for personal gain, often at the expense of others. This state produces several negative outcomes. For instance, while pursuing self-interest by both the wealthy and the poor reinforces the existing wealthy-poor divide and increases inequality, their prioritizing short-term benefits over long-term balance leads to unsustainability. On the other hand, their constant striving fueled by desires, aversions, and self-centeredness generates dissatisfaction and inter-personal conflicts. By contrast, the unconditioned mind is like rainwater flowing freely across open ground. It is expansive, adaptive, and sensitive not only to the self but also to others and to nature. Freed from the narrow channels of conditioning, such a mind responds creatively and compassionately to life's challenges. This state of consciousness leads to equality because decisions are guided fairness and inclusiveness. Their actions lead to sustainability since they respect the well-being of themselves, others, nature as well as future generations. They seek happiness, arising not from external possessions or status but from inner peace, contentment and harmony with themselves, others and nature. This contrast between conditioned and unconditioned modes of mind provides the central framework for the proposed theory. Where conditioning narrows human potential and perpetuates social problems, the freeing from conditioning opens new pathways toward equality, sustainability, and genuine well-being.

Though both wealthy and poor groups represent opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, they share a strikingly similar psychological foundation. Both groups, regardless of material circumstances, are subject to the same mental conditioning: desires, aversions, the sense of self, and self-centeredness. They shape the thought and behavior of both groups in ways that perpetuate dissatisfaction and division. For those living in poverty, conditioning often takes the form of a strong aversion to their disadvantaged circumstances and an equally strong desire to escape them. This mindset can fuel determination but also creates feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and restlessness. At the same time, individuals born into wealth are conditioned by a desire to maintain or expand their privileged position, coupled with an aversion to loss, insecurity, or downward mobility. Despite their different economic realities, both groups are driven by the same psychological mechanisms of desire and fear. This shared conditioning has several important consequences:

- It fosters self-centered decision-making, where both rich and poor act primarily to protect or advance their own interests.
- It contributes to the perpetuation of inequality, as structural divides are reinforced by the choices of individuals across classes.
- It sustains unsustainability, since both groups are inclined to prioritize short-term satisfactions over long-term collective well-being.
- It generates unhappiness, as neither wealth nor escape from poverty guarantees freedom from the dissatisfaction rooted in conditioned desires.

Recognizing this common psychological foundation is crucial. It shows that poverty reduction cannot be achieved solely by altering external conditions, such as income levels or access to resources. Without addressing the deeper conditioning that drives human behavior across all socio-economic groups, efforts to reduce poverty, inequality, and unsustainability will remain incomplete.

Transformative Potential: From Self-Centeredness to Whole-Centeredness

It is clear that the psychological root of poverty, inequality, and unsustainability lies in mental conditioning. Then the pathway to transformation must involve freeing the mind from conditioning. The shift required is a movement from self-centeredness to whole-centeredness. In the conditioned state, individuals act primarily from the perspective of personal desire and aversion. Choices are driven by “What benefits me?” or “What protects me from loss?” This

orientation narrows perception and sustains patterns of inequality, competition, and environmental harm. On the other hand, when the mind is freed from conditioning, its orientation shifts fundamentally. Instead of being confined to the self, awareness expands to include others, the community, future generations, and the natural world. Decisions are guided not by narrow self-interest but by a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility for the whole.

The transformative potential of this shift is profound. At the individual level, people experience greater peace, freedom, and happiness, no longer caught in cycles of restless desire and fear. At the societal level, whole-centeredness fosters cooperation, fairness, and sustainable living, laying the groundwork for reducing inequality and ensuring long-term collective well-being. Crucially, this transformation is not dependent on socio-economic position. Both the poor and the wealthy have equal capacity to transcend conditioning. While external resources may differ, the inner capacity for awareness and liberation is universally available. This universality underscores the inclusiveness of the theory: true poverty reduction and sustainable development begin with inner change that transcends class boundaries.

Implications of the Theory

The theory would have profound implications for poverty reduction strategies. Traditional strategies focus largely on external interventions, economic aid, policy reform, education, and infrastructure. This theory suggests that such measures must be complemented by inner transformation to achieve lasting results. Scholars and practitioners are encouraged to study the psycho-spiritual dimensions of poverty and wealth, exploring how awareness practices, mindfulness, and other transformative methods can contribute to sustainable poverty reduction. Governments, NGOs, and development agencies can incorporate programs that foster inner change, such as education in awareness, community practices, or contemplative approaches, alongside material interventions.

The proposed theory of mental conditioning carries significant implications for individuals, societies, and the broader field of poverty reduction. By reframing poverty not only as an economic or structural issue but also as a psychological one, it opens new pathways for research, policy, and practice. At the individual level, they learn that lasting happiness is not dependent on material gain but on liberation from conditioning. Freed from cycles of desire and aversion, people experience greater peace, mental clarity, and the ability to navigate challenges without being dominated by fear or craving. Because the capacity to transcend conditioning is inherent in all humans, this transformation is not limited by social or economic status. At the society level, Whole-centered decision-making promotes fairness, cooperation, and inclusiveness, breaking the self-centered patterns that sustain divides between rich and poor. A whole-centered mindset aligns human behavior with the needs of the environment and future generations, reducing destructive, short-term exploitation and therefore leading to sustainability. Societal progress is redefined not only in terms of economic growth but also in terms of harmony, compassion, and shared happiness.

Limitations and Future Research

While the proposed theory of mental conditioning offers a fresh perspective on poverty reduction, it is not without limitations. Recognizing these boundaries is essential for refining the theory and guiding future research. The idea of transcending conditioning is conceptually clear but difficult to define in measurable terms. More work is needed to translate this process into operational concepts that can be studied empirically. Mental conditioning, awareness, and transcendence may be understood differently in diverse cultural and religious contexts. Care must be taken to avoid imposing one cultural framework universally. Apart from these conceptual limitations, we acknowledge that the application of this theory would also face some practical difficulties. Integrating inner transformation into poverty reduction programs requires new educational, institutional, and policy approaches. Such initiatives may face resistance from systems focused primarily on economic solutions. Inner transformation is gradual and requires individual commitment. This may not align with the urgency of poverty reduction programs that seek rapid, measurable outcomes.

Further research is needed to operationalize the key concepts of conditioning, self-centeredness, and whole-centeredness by developing reliable tools and indicators for measurement. This should be complemented by qualitative and quantitative studies that explore the impact of awareness practices, mindfulness, and contemplative methods on behaviors linked to equality, sustainability, and wellbeing. Cross-disciplinary engagement—drawing from psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, development studies, and spirituality—will be essential in refining and validating the theory. In addition, pilot programs that integrate inner transformation practices into poverty reduction initiatives, particularly in structurally disadvantaged communities, can provide valuable insights. By addressing these directions, the theory remains open, flexible, and testable, fostering dialogue across disciplines and encouraging both scholars and practitioners to further develop and extend the framework.

Closing Reflections

At the core, the theory suggests that the root of perpetuation of poverty, inequality, unsustainability, and unhappiness lies not only in external structures but also in the conditioned patterns of the human mind. Desires, aversions, and self-centeredness shape both individual and collective behavior, perpetuating cycles of poverty and wealth alike. Yet the human mind is not permanently bound by conditioning. Unlike a computer, which can never exceed its programming, humans possess the capacity to transcend their conditioning. By moving beyond conditioned self-centeredness and opening the path to whole-centeredness, individuals and societies can foster equality, sustainability, and genuine well-being. The implications of this shift are profound. Poverty reduction strategies must be reimagined to integrate inner transformation alongside external interventions. Lasting change requires attention not only to material needs but also to the inner needs that are authentic. While challenges remain, such as conceptual clarity, cultural diversity, and practical application, the potential of this theory lies in its universality and inclusiveness. Both rich and poor share the same mental conditioning, and both have the innate capacity to transcend it. In this sense, the pathway to poverty reduction is not exclusive but collective: a shared human journey toward freedom, harmony, and happiness. Ultimately, the theory of mental conditioning invites us to look within. Real transformation begins when the mind is freed from conditioning, allowing us to live not from narrow self-interest but from the expansive awareness of the whole. It is in this shift—from self-centeredness to whole-centeredness—that the promise of equality, sustainability, and genuine wellbeing can be realized.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

Since qualitative interpretation and conclusion-drawing can be inherently influenced by researchers' biases arising from their perspectives, judgments, beliefs, and attitudes, conscious efforts were made to minimize such biases. The researchers practiced non-judgmental observation of their own thoughts and emotions to maintain mental clarity and objectivity. Preliminary conclusions were also shared with key informants to verify their accuracy and ensure they were free from researcher bias. Furthermore, the validity of the conclusions, particularly regarding the inadequacy of delayed gratification and the effectiveness of mental conditioning in explaining the perpetuation of poverty and inequality, was cross-checked against relevant literature in psychology and neuroscience.

This study critically examined delayed gratification theory in the context of poverty reduction and sustainability, identifying both its strengths and its limitations. While the ability to postpone immediate rewards explains individual mobility among the poor and the preservation of wealth among the rich, it remains rooted in self-centered striving. This orientation reinforces inequality, fosters subtle unhappiness, and perpetuates unsustainability.

At the core, our proposed theory suggests that the root of the perpetuation of poverty, inequality, unsustainability, and unhappiness lies not only in external structures but also in the conditioned patterns of the human mind. Desires, aversions, and self-centeredness shape both individual and collective behavior, perpetuating cycles of poverty and wealth alike. Yet the human mind is not permanently bound by conditioning. By moving beyond conditioned self-centeredness and opening the path to whole-centeredness, individuals and societies can foster equality, sustainability, and genuine well-being.

The findings of this study highlight that poverty reduction strategies rooted solely in delayed gratification are inherently limited. While they may enable individuals to escape poverty or sustain wealth, they remain tied to the endless cycle of desires and aversions, reinforcing inequality, self-centeredness, and unsustainable development. To break this cycle, policy interventions must aim not at postponing desires but at transcending them a shift from conditioned mindsets to unconditioned awareness. Such a transformation requires integrating spiritual, psychological, and educational dimensions into development policy.

Policy Recommendations

We propose five interlinked policy recommendations, each grounded in the theoretical framework developed in this research.

Utilize Local Religious and Cultural Centers as Platforms for Mental Liberation

Religious institutions are deeply rooted in communities across Sri Lanka and beyond. Traditionally, they have served as places of ritual, moral instruction, and social gathering. However, under the current framework, they can be reoriented as spaces that foster liberation from conditioning rather than reinforcing external religiosity. By cultivating

values such as love, compassion, and unity, these centers can help individuals loosen attachments to desires and fears that sustain poverty and inequality.

This approach does not call for the imposition of dogma, but for the universal dimension of spirituality to be emphasized where all people, regardless of background, are encouraged to transcend the ego-driven mindset. Policies can support this by funding programs, providing training for clergy, and creating interfaith dialogues centered on inner transformation. This will also help bridge the divide between poor and wealthy, fostering social harmony.

Reform and Empower Religious Leadership

For religious centers to become agents of transformation, leadership itself must be renewed. Religious leaders often wield enormous influence but are sometimes trapped in external rituals or traditional authority. Policies should therefore mandate training in psychology, counselling, and spiritual transformation for leaders, equipping them with the tools to guide communities toward authentic spirituality.

Such reformed leadership can address the root causes of poverty and inequality by shifting the focus from external success and material acquisition to inner peace, compassion, and collective well-being. The reorientation of leadership is essential for moving beyond delayed gratification toward mental liberation, since leaders can model and transmit the values of unconditioned awareness.

Promote Adult Education for Inner Freedom

Education systems worldwide have tended to emphasize technical knowledge and employability, often neglecting personal development and inner growth. This study suggests that sustainable poverty reduction requires adult education programs that integrate critical self-awareness, mindfulness, and spiritual understanding.

Through workshops, community classes, and media campaigns, adults can be encouraged to question cultural conditioning, recognize the insatiability of desires, and cultivate empathy and ethical responsibility. Such programs would foster individuals who are not merely consumers of wealth or opportunities but who contribute to building cooperative, compassionate, and sustainable societies.

By framing adult education as a lifelong process of self-liberation, policies can help individuals escape the trap of conditioned desires that perpetuate both poverty and unsustainable wealth.

Introduce Spiritual and Psychological Training for Development Professionals

Development professionals, whether working in NGOs, government, or international organizations, tend to approach poverty reduction in terms of resources, infrastructure, or economic empowerment. While these are important, they often neglect the inner psychological and spiritual conditioning that sustains poverty and inequality.

Policies should therefore integrate spiritual psychology training into professional development curricula. This training would help practitioners understand how desires, aversions, and self-centeredness shape people's choices and limitations. With such awareness, development professionals can design holistic, person-centered programs that address not only material needs but also mental and emotional liberation.

This recommendation ensures that poverty reduction efforts move beyond "helping people delay gratification" toward empowering them to transcend desires altogether, creating the foundation for sustainable well-being.

Address Cultural Resistance through Dialogue and Inclusive Education

A significant barrier to these policy directions is cultural resistance. Many communities are deeply attached to traditions, rituals, and status-driven practices that reinforce conditioned desires. Attempting to replace them may provoke opposition. Instead, policies should encourage dialogue-based approaches that respect cultural traditions while gently introducing universal spiritual values. Educational campaigns, school curricula, and media initiatives can highlight stories of individuals and communities that have embraced compassion, unity, and simplicity as pathways to happiness. By framing transformation not as rejection of culture but as evolution of culture, policies can create smoother acceptance. This recommendation is essential for avoiding conflict and ensuring that the proposed paradigm shift is sustainable across generations.

Closing Reflections

Taken together, these policy recommendations aim to reshape development practice from one that is materialist and self-centered to one that is holistic, person-centered, and spiritually grounded. The theory of mental conditioning shows that poverty and inequality are not merely economic problems but are deeply tied to mental habits of desire and

aversion. Policies must therefore create environments in which individuals can move toward unaroused happiness, inner peace, and whole-centeredness, thereby reducing inequality and fostering sustainability. This approach addresses the gaps left by delayed gratification theory. Instead of perpetuating cycles of desire and fear, these policies seek to dissolve the very basis of unsustainable behavior. The goal is not simply poverty alleviation, but sustainable poverty reduction that leads to happiness, equality, and harmony. Building on field evidence and contemplative insights, our proposed framework emphasizes the possibility of transcending desires and clearing the path for whole-centeredness, a state in which action flows not from ego or separateness but from an awareness of interconnectedness with others, nature, and future generations. By reframing poverty not only as an external condition but also as a psychological state shaped by desires, aversions, and self-centeredness, this theory offers a more holistic foundation for sustainable development.

The implications are far-reaching. Poverty reduction strategies must integrate inner transformation with external interventions. Education, religious and cultural centers, and development professionals all have roles to play in cultivating awareness and freeing individuals from conditioning. Such an approach does not reject delayed gratification but situates it within a broader process of transcending desire, enabling well-being that is sustainable, equitable, and genuinely human. Ultimately, lasting poverty reduction requires a shift from self-centeredness to whole-centeredness. This shift opens the possibility of development that promotes equality, sustainability, and happiness for all, redefining progress not as material accumulation but as collective flourishing.

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